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Crossing the River

by

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Translated from the Hebrew by Vern Lenz

Jerusalem 2003

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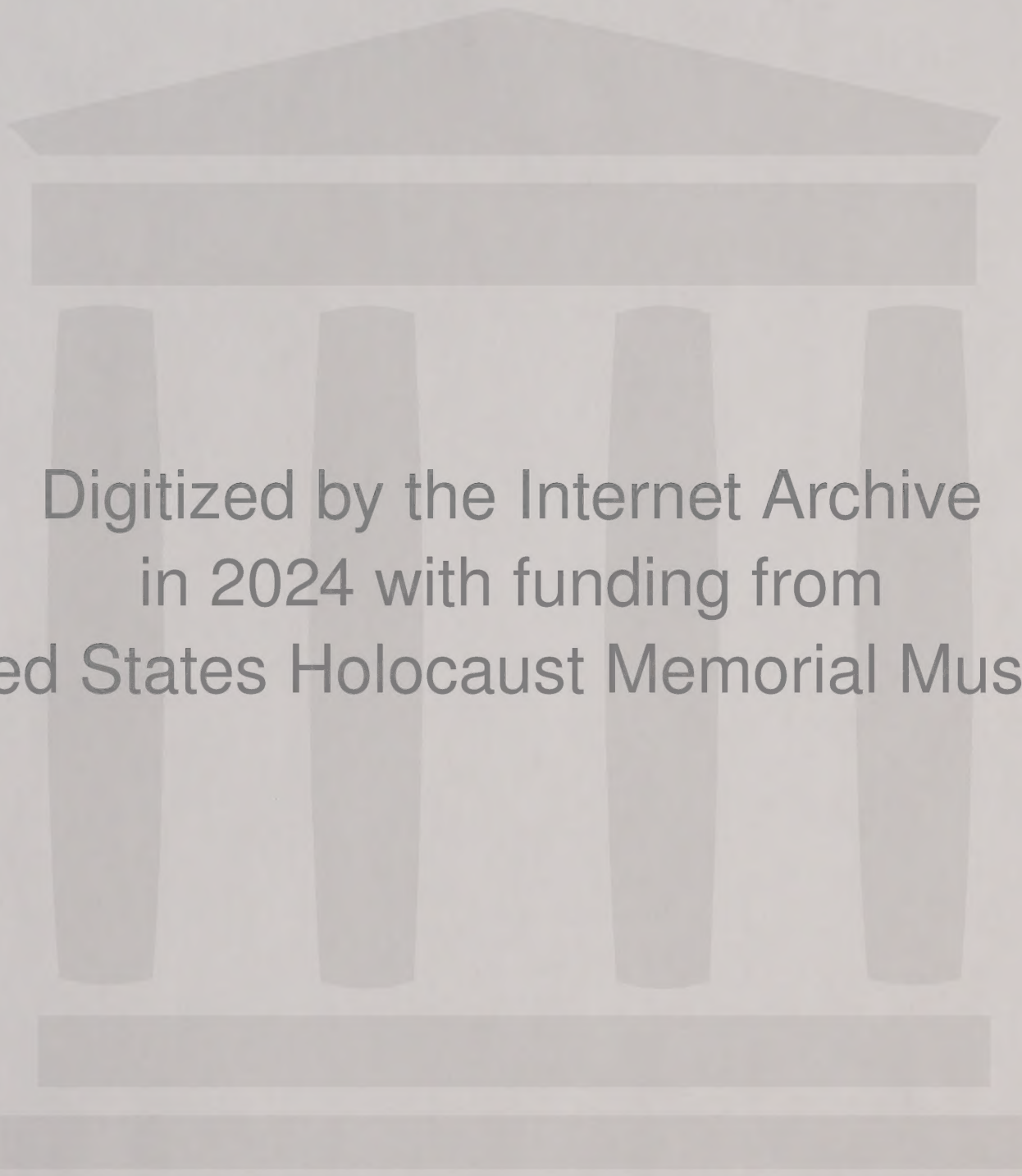
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Prologue

I didn't really want to leave that morning, to emerge from the dim warmth of Mother and our only room, to prepare to depart. But I had to. All the arrangements had been made, and now everything depended on getting past the sentries successfully.

It was a clear, crisp dawn in early spring and we may have had something to eat before setting out. Near the house I was befriended by a puppy which ran after us and I was torn — here at last was a dog that could be mine. I tried to plead with Mother to let me go back just long enough to shut the pup in our room, so that if my escape failed again this morning, too, then at least I would have my very own dog, for the first time in years.

But this time my exit was fast and smooth. The German officer was absent, and the roll call was supervised only by our people, with no interference from the guards. A few more steps and we had already reached the riverbank. Oars cut through the calm water, and I looked around me, wonderstruck. After years in the ghetto, suddenly a river, so much space, and me to sail upon it, like long ago at summer camp.

As we neared the other bank, my mother quietly removed the two yellow patches, the threads of which she had previously cut, and which were now fastened only with a safety pin. Her instructions were clear: once we reached the other bank I was to march without stopping through the Lithuanians standing there, cross the road, and go up the path that led into the hills. All alone, I was to walk without raising suspicion and without looking back. Further up the path, a woman would meet me and tell me what to do.

Everything went as planned, except that I met no woman waiting for me on the path. I proceeded according to my instructions, going deeper into the hills, farther and farther from the riverbank and my mother. Only then did a figure with a sealed face approach me and as she passed me she whispered that I should continue slowly, she would soon return and join me. A short while later I was following her, up a steep path, and I soon found myself in the house of an elderly Lithuanian woman, Marija.

All this occurred so quickly and so easily that I scarcely grasped what had happened to me in such a short while. To tell the truth, I am not sure even today, after these many years, that I have fully digested what happened to me that morning. But the next day I received the first letter from my mother, written on a rolled-up scrap of paper, to be read and then burned: "I watched you move away, my child," she wrote, and I will never forget this, "climbing all by yourself onto the bank of the river, walking past guards and people on your way to freedom. A day will come when a film will be made about your miraculous escape from the ghetto."

Like Moses in the bulrushes I was cast by Mother onto the shore of life. I therefore dedicate this story to my mother, who gave me life twice, but was unable to save her own even once.

How It Began

We abandoned our flat and set out.

The closer we got to our allotted area the more people we met dragging things along with them. Some carried huge bundles on their heads or on their backs. Others pushed wheelbarrows, children's pushchairs, or even dragged overloaded tin bathtubs on the street. A fortunate few had a wagon hitched to a horse. I began to spot more and more people I knew among the marchers, young and old; they were all on the move from different directions to the same place, and this gave something like a sense of relief.

The flow of people, which grew denser on the bridge, thinned out again on the other side of the river. I managed to notice that we had passed through a high wooden gate leaning on either side on a tall barbed-wire fence that stretched out and disappeared into narrow alleys. Between these two spans of fence was the ghetto. It seemed huge to me, broad and endless. The fence at its edges didn't bother me at all.

The new arrivals poured into the houses to find places for themselves. Quarreling broke out over an extra room, over a private corner, over the right to put a stool in the common kitchen or to stretch a clothesline. They argued and bargained and raged, unwilling to resign themselves to the conditions imposed upon them. We dove into that turmoil, and there was no turning back.

For years I have tried to recall what I had been dreaming the moment before I woke that Sunday, trying to persuade myself that I was still dreaming, what my feelings were during the last seconds before the thunder came. One day I will wake and it will be a regular Sunday morning in my hometown Kovno on June 22, 1941, one of the longest days of the year.

At first I attached little importance to the sounds that woke me. Together with the explosions, I heard gunfire, sounds that were somehow already familiar to me at the time. I had first heard similar noises the summer before, on the riverbank during summer break. On that fine morning I was attentively watching a tennis match between relaxed, white-clad vacationers, when airplanes suddenly began performing odd maneuvers high above us. One

after another they would dive with a loud roar toward a large tube-shaped sack that another, slower plane was pulling. While we children on the ground were engaged in a furtive struggle over the privilege of retrieving tennis balls for the players on the court, the planes in the air abruptly opened fire at each other in several short, sharp bursts. We were startled, but those among us who knew assured us that these were only maneuvers, and thus we learned a new word. The tennis players went on with their game, and this was a sufficient hint for me that it is better to pretend that all was well. Suddenly, at no great distance from us and with no warning sound, a sooty brass shell fell to the ground. We rushed to look at the oddity that had dropped from the sky. Perhaps it was dangerous? Every bystander had a suggestion about what to do with it, whom to deliver it to, to the police or to the soldiers patrolling in pairs – anything as long as it be taken away from the sharp-eyed boy, the lucky devil, who had first discovered the strange thing. So the peaceful tennis lawns of a summer resort were in fact the scene of my first contact with the sounds and weapons of war.

Several weeks before that Sunday morning I went with my parents to see a famous movie about Lenin. In one scene, a pretty young woman with dark eyes and black hair, Fanya Kaplan, was preparing to make an attempt on the life of the great leader. Smoking a cigarette, deep in concentration, she lined up a number of small bullets on a tabletop. One was given to understand - perhaps my mother explained this to me - the connection between these seemingly innocent details and the barrel of the gun that the young woman aimed later at the much-loved man, just after he had finished a rousing speech to a group of factory workers. There was a dry cracking sound, and Comrade Vladimir Ilyich dropped to the floor in a pool of blood. My parents broke into a fierce argument as we returned from the movie theater. He was a loyal Zionist and she a confirmed communist. Father wanted her to be the kind of housewife who would fix meals for him on time, while she, whose friends called her "Umru" (Yiddish for "unrest"), wanted to save the world. Mother condemned the assassination attempt wholeheartedly (Lenin had not yet died), while Father said, "You saw how she pondered, how thoughtful and serious she was, how hard it was for her to decide." This film, to be more precise, was my first meeting with the tools of destruction and death.

So the sound of guns going off, heard in my sleep and known to me in the depths of my memory, should not have disturbed me. The house was quiet. Apparently no one but I had woken.

I was about to try falling back to sleep, but then – a knock on the door. At this hour? In came the Schirms, the photographer and his wife, who had no children and lived half a flight above us. They were already dressed, apologizing for disturbing us so early, at half past five in the morning. "Can you hear it? Do you know what's going on? Is it war?" Father, still half-asleep, had opened the door. He shrugged. He thought he had heard some thunder in the distance – but war? With my eyes closed, I followed the animated conversation and called out confidently and authoritatively: "Those are airplanes on maneuvers like the ones we saw last year at summer camp." The adults gathered around my bed, eagerly drinking in my words, giving me a great deal of pleasure. They continue to question me, listening to my decisive explanations, clearly hoping to persuade themselves that I am right. The Schirms seemed to become a little calmer. They were already on their way to some relatives in town, but now they decided to wait a while, at least until the seven o'clock news: surely, someone will explain things then.

The rumbling sounds from beyond the horizon did not cease. Heavy and earthshaking, they rolled toward us in waves like a rainstorm. Even though the skies were clear, something seemed to thicken in the distance like a little cloud that swelled to engulf us, and the frightening word, spoken first by the Schirms, rolled inside, filling the entire flat until soon it was unstoppable. War? Returning to bed was impossible, and Mother was not at home. Summer vacation had just begun, and she, a nurse, had gone with a group of children the day before to the summer resort. Our own plans were to join her in a day or two, to our great joy, according to a detailed itinerary that I had been excitedly rehearsing for days. That same day, Uncle David was due to arrive from his distant shtetl, by bicycle with a friend. Both teachers, they were delegates to the national teachers' conference opening the next day. They had a full agenda for their stay in the city, the details of which they had carefully planned long ago and coordinated with us by telephone, itself a novelty. War was simply out of the question.

Of the possible connection between airplanes and war, I had first learned two years earlier. It was toward the end of summer, in September, and, like every year during that season, we had gone to a resort. We called it “summer camp”. Then refugees from neighboring Poland began arriving in Lithuania, showing up even in our summer resort.

Scene: A sleepy, tranquil afternoon. Vacationers gather like sea birds under the shaded veranda of the hotel, idle and silent. The anxious voice of a rather overdressed lady suddenly drawls in a sonorous, smug, but worried voice, “I do hope their planes can spot the little white boundary posts between Poland and Lithuania.” She seems to be talking only to her husband, but there is something self-important in her expression, in her unconcealed effort to be overheard by others, that causes me to raise my eyes at that moment and intercept a look of amused contempt being exchanged by my parents. *End of scene.*

The memory of a child: later, in the ghetto, when Father was no longer with us and my mother and I had become close friends, I recalled that picture in the resort. I asked Mother the reason for the scorn they had for the lady who spoke about the white boundary posts. Mother, who also recalled the incident, explained how ignorant the lady was, her condescending manner notwithstanding, to imagine that the entire Polish-Lithuanian boundary was marked with white posts of the kind that she had no doubt seen beside some quaint border station – and how naive she was to believe that such markers would be enough, in themselves, to deter the Luftwaffe from crossing the border into our small country. At the time, when Mother and I had that conversation, we were already surrounded by high posts and barbed wire, and no additional proof of the Germans’ overwhelming might was required.

So there had been plenty of early warning signs. Why then, why was nothing done? Only a week before, on a Sunday afternoon, my parents were talking with their guests, who were teachers: “... so there is going to be a war,” one of them summed up, and I remember rushing to Mother in a way I had never done before, entreating her, pleading, “Mother, don’t let there be war! Don’t let it happen!” As if my mother had the power to erase the latent dread that had suddenly revealed itself in my outcry.

I used to sit on the wide window ledge in our flat, high on the fourth storey, looking out like a captain from the bridge of his ship. The lower walls of our building were very thick; it had apparently been a monastery in previous centuries. Only our floor, the top one, was a flimsy addition. Although the outside walls were covered with tin sheeting, it was very damp, giving Mother severe rheumatic pains also in later years.

Seated safely on the window ledge, I loved to look out into the distance. From here everything looked firm and secure, spread out below as from a high mountaintop. At my feet lay roofs of houses, churches and monasteries. Far to the south could be glimpsed the contours of the great river that traverses our city, and beyond it rose the steep green hills.

We used to cross the northern edge of town by bus on our annual visit to our Grandfather and Grandmother, Father's parents, who lived in a tiny shtetl. It was a long journey to their house, full of unfamiliar sights and experiences: village after village, each with a church with its cross atop the square spire, surrounded by a marketplace. Strange people would get on and off the bus, with such mute hostility. I never knew why.

Grandfather, the shtetl's rabbi, was always strict and serious, and Grandmother, with her thick legs, round face and heavy gait, was extremely goodhearted. After a visit when I was three years old or so, I began writing greetings to Grandmother, in large block letters in the margins of the weekend newspapers that Father would collect and send at regular intervals. Grandfather, an austere man who was well versed in the Torah, chose to serve in a small shtetl so as not to be distracted from his writing by community affairs.

The last moments of my Grandfather's were accounted for by a witness. When the Jews of Vidukle were led to the killing pit during the hot days of August of that year, the rabbi, my Grandfather, straggled unwillingly at the end of the column, stubbornly refusing to quicken his pace. From his hiding place, the sole survivor from the village heard the Lithuanians tell the story as they returned, content with the deed their hands had performed.

I knew the southern slopes of the hills on the other side of the river thanks to the Sunday afternoon walks we used to take picking flowers and wandering through the green meadow. From there the whole city and the river adorning it

could be taken in at once. There, too, stood the shack of the famous author Avraham Mapu, where he had written *Love of Zion*. Nearby stood the glass domes of the botanical garden, where rare trees grew like those, I was also told, that flourished and bloomed without shelter in Zion's landscape. South of this slope spread the large airport, lying in wait for the days to come.

Downstream along the great river, to the west, one could leave our town on calm, untroubled waters, and there lay the realms of my dreams. Long rows of rafts made of cut logs floated silently downriver toward sawmills in distant ports. Every summer the riverboats took us down this route to recreation spots along the banks. That year, too, we were planning to have a holiday at one of these resorts, as soon as Mother let us know that all was ready.

We lived in the lower city, at the meeting of two rivers. From this ancient corner the town had grown and climbed the surrounding hills, spreading beyond the banks of both rivers. Every spring the old quarter was prone to flooding. The thick cover of winter ice, which turned the whole river into a glorious skating rink, would crack and buckle and break off in huge chunks, piling one on top of the other at the juncture of the rivers, preventing the water from bursting through to the sea. The pent-up streams would invade the land, seeping into the basements and lower storeys. Although the water never reached us, on spring nights I would imagine the lapping sounds of water about to emerge from the deep cellar beneath our home. Silently, the water would rise higher and higher, and by the time it burst through, the bells of the firemen would already mingle with the anguished screams of the drowning people crying for help. Was it not too late? Could we not have been better prepared?

At the tip of the peninsula the cathedrals, monasteries, and Catholic churches were huddled. The streets there were narrow, paved and clean. Mustachioed janitors would thoroughly scrub the droppings of carriage horses from between the pavement stones. Novitiates in pairs and nuns with starched collars pattered through the street. Through large shop windows ornate coffins peered out at me, glossy and lacquered. From here luxurious funeral processions with big candles, a priest bedecked in white vestments, and children's choirs would set out with ceremonial splendor into the main street which led beneath our window. One day nearby my mother rescued a small

Lithuanian child from the wheels of a bus, one of the modern snub-nosed kind that had been introduced that year to our city. Mother returned the boy to his parents who were busy selecting a coffin, but added a word or two about parents' responsibility for the lives of their children – making it all the more difficult for them to return a word of thanks to a Jewess.

The walls of the Jesuits' buildings in our quarter were thick and still. Their lowest windows were high, almost invisible to the children playing beneath them. From within the walls of that mysterious building on Mapu Street we sometimes heard the tremulous sob of a violin. Perhaps there was a conservatory within, or maybe some tortured monk airing his laments. But the children said the house was bewitched, and that anyone who dared to touch or lean against the wall was doomed to die. With dread we would dare one another to come close to the wall, touch it for an instant, and flee with a burst of nervous laughter. It was indeed a cursed house: before many years had passed, almost none of the Jewish children who had touched its walls remained alive.

It seems that nothing I remember from the prewar years remains as vivid and as sharply focused in my memory as our summer vacations at the resort. Each holiday was always an adventure from which I returned filled to the brim with impressions, the raw material for daydreams and fancies for the rest of the year. The intense preparation before embarking on the voyage; then boarding the *Parakhod*, the steamboat whose engines were already roaring, proclaiming their power; the mounting suspense at the sound of whistles blowing fiercely from large smokestacks; clanking chains; the anchor raised; long poles pushing between the posts of the pier as it receded from us; and there we were in the heart of the river – would our boat not sink at once?

The boat had two large cylindrical propellers jutting out from each side. Their blades would deepen into the water, emerge, and deepen again in hypnotic motion, first hesitantly, then with increasing speed. A shudder would run down the long corridors and across the round portholes fastened with large screws. In the bow of the ship, in the control center high above everyone else, the steersman stood with the captain beside him, confidently directing the vessel wherever he wished, all obeying his commands. Later, in the ghetto, I played on a mound of sand exactly as if it were such a ship. There, unseen by man

or child, I could steer my own great ship over the raging waves without people or fences to stop me, until we were suddenly evacuated from that place with only a few hours' notice, and I had no ship to steer and nowhere to go.

The riverboat on the way to our vacation would chug forward steadily. At intervals it seemed to know, astonishingly, where to turn inland toward hidden shores, and to find a wooden pier standing on thin posts, on where passengers from the city and farmers with their wagons were waiting. People would get off, others would get on; a deafening whistle would sound to the skies and once again we sailed forth, to the next destination.

Once on land, we found ourselves in a small village - one or two main streets, summer houses for rent, several sweet shops, a grocery store and a bakery. Swans floating at ease in a fenced lake surrounded by a promenade with a bandstand. Children and adults knocking wooden balls through tiny wickets, playing croquet. Jews from the whole country, from the big city and from shtetls, gathered together for the summer. They played cards, checkers, read Jewish newspapers, and chatted endlessly. Here was the illustrated Jewish magazine *Yiddishe Bilder*, featuring photographs of the violinist Yascha Heifetz, the British minister Hore-Belisha, and the famous actor, Maurice Schwartz, and you could feel proud and confident at the sight of so many well-known Jews, talented and distinguished among the people of all nations. Above the village and surrounding it stood a forest. Forest air, as everyone knows, is very healthy, especially for city dwellers. The trees in the forest were tall and close ranked; between any pair of them we could tie a *gamak*, a hammock of thick woven canvas, and swing till we were dizzy.

And beyond the forest, oh - when we dared to venture beyond it - lay another land of wonders, tempting and frightening. Endless plains, fields of golden grain heaped with sheaves, and paths twisting and disappearing. At crossroads we would often encounter a kneeling figure bowed in prayer at the feet of the crucified Christ or his mother the Madonna. The Savior would be huddled under a little roof with an abundance of withered flowers and burned out candles at his feet. This was a country of devout Catholics, who had not forgotten the crucifixion. When they passed us we always hastened to greet them, but they never returned our salutations; we were strangers here. Only Father and his fellow writers dared venture far in their walks. Father's friend

Nathan would boast that he could reach the warm heart of the simple Lithuanian peasant, man of toil and soil, that he could speak his language and remove barriers, bridging the gap between one man and another. And yet Nathan himself did not remain long – he went to Eretz-Israel and became a well-known writer there. During the walks I took with Father on unknown roads outside the village, a heavy feeling of oppression would overcome me, an inexplicable tension. Perhaps this was because Father once told me during one of these walks, my hand tightly grasping his large palm, what happened to a boy who hid and fell asleep in a sheaf of grain in a field. In the end the boy found himself – and here my father, ever the teacher, detailed each of the stages by which wheat is ground to flour and baked in the oven – in the end the boy found himself in a loaf of bread on the table of a family sitting down to its meal. An unspoken worry settled down inside of me and I only hoped it would never happen to me – I would never fall asleep in a sheaf of grain, I would always be alert and cautious.

And perhaps the source of my discomfort layed not so much in the story itself, but rather in the circumstances in which I first heard it, outside my Grandfather's shtetl as we approached the railroad crossing where only the day before there had been a fatal collision between a bus and a train. The local children told me in gory detail how the torn bodies were collected and laid out for identification in the nearby railroad station, the one by the grove.

Each was a world unto itself, the forest, the river, and the resort. My austere Grandfather's reaction to it, when he came for one short visit, was to pronounce contemptuously: "Nu, Oilam Haze!" ("This world", materialistic and pleasure seeking). For a city child like me there was never a better testing ground for life than this rural resort. I would return home each year a little more mature, like a grub growing in fits and starts by seasonally shedding its skin.

Sometimes particularly exciting things happened there. Once a muffled crash was suddenly heard, breaking the peaceful quiet of the day. It was the shaft of the milkman's wagon, whose maddened horse had implanted it deep into a telephone pole alongside the road. Jugs rolled, milk spilled. The milkmaid, who made the rounds of the resort pouring milk out of the lid of a jug, was thrown out of the wagon and fell to the ground unconscious, lying still as a

stone, as white as the milk. Where's the doctor? A doctor! cried the widening circle of vacationers who gazed at the drama and did nothing at all about it.

At night there was the sigh of wind in the trees, fear-sowing chirps and cackles, violent storms accompanied by tremendous peals of thunder, lightning stripping away all cover of darkness, and no escape. I was all alone, like the delirious child facing the stern Erl King in the poem Mother loved to recite. Only closing your eyes tightly, desperately burrowing deep into the blanket, or even far under the bed, might help.

Sometimes a house would burst into flames. Amazing is the speed with which a family's home can burn up before your very eyes. Was it lightning that set it aflame? To the sound of bells and sirens, the fire engines hasten and surround the burning house, panicked Jews crowd around the fire chief, almost touching the hem of his mantle. They press close to hear his every word. Strong and tall, his feet rooted firmly in his land, he answers their questions patiently. Will the fire spread? Or do they have everything under control this time? Are their own houses, God forbid, likely to burn? Worried and helpless, they hang on his advice. What to do, what to do!?

The word "war" was on many lips during that year. In Rotushe Square, next to our house, the authorities dug a model bomb shelter and invited everyone to see it. I trailed my father, who was as usual deep in conversation with a friend during the tour, through the twisting and dimly lit underground leviathan, full of hallways, ventilation slots and sharp corners, which kept in its internals buckets of sand, shovels, and pickaxes. We went through it in single file, each creeping close on the heels of the other. With great relief I discerned at last the light at the other exit, from which we emerged once again into the square. So why did I rush into my mother's arms, in a way I had never done before, when I overheard talk of war between my parents and their teacher friends that afternoon? Did I really believe, sensible, blue-eyed, curly-haired and round-faced boy that I was, that my mother could prevent war? A few days before that, seated alone on that very window ledge, I had observed the national guard performing maneuvers in the city. I was ill and alone in the house, on the very day when my class was on a field trip to the forest and the river. From the height of my window, I viewed the exciting action taking place below: when the sirens went off, inspectors ran and blew whistles, clearing

people off the streets, scolding and even handing out fines; cars and carts stopped in their tracks, forbidden to proceed further. Only fire engines with wailing sirens were allowed to speed unhindered down the streets, followed closely by ambulances adorned with red crosses. From my safe vantage point above it all, the scene below looked quite entertaining.

It had been going on all year, come to think of it, not just during that week—the word war was on everyone's lips. The frightening word had become a permanent part of everyday life ever since the Russians, "at the request of the masses," had invaded and taken over the three tiny Baltic states. Our diminutive president, whose face I knew from postage stamps, took his car and escaped immediately, first to Germany and later to South America.

When I went shopping with Mother we would pass his palace, which stood between the old city and the new. A green iron fence, lawns, immense trees, and stern-faced guards. My imagination would go wild – what lies hidden there in the depths of that courtyard, was it really a king's palace like the ones in fairy tales? Later I was to enter the palace, together with the rest of the young pioneers from Orphanage No. 4, founded for Jewish children after the war. We were there by invitation of the Central Communist Youth House, now headquartered in the former president's palace, for a weekend of activities with other branches of the movement in the city. Hesitant and cautious, we trod there, the few Jewish children, on the heavy carpets, going up and down the curving swan-neck staircase, and we wondered – is this then a palace? Even that illusion, one of the last, was shattered. The next day we went on a hike to the north, up past the hills. Competing groups tried to pass us, jostling and mocking, and all the way I was thinking – as long as they don't take us to the Ninth Fort.^{*a}

When the Russians arrived, we were visiting Mossik's family on the Green Mountain. I considered him my best friend, with whom my eyes were first opened gradually from the fog of infancy. From then on both our families were close. They too, like us, had a boy and girl whose ages were about the same as ours. From time to time Father would take Mossik's father aside for a talk, and during the course of their whisperings Mossik's father would open a hidden cupboard, take out a number of banknotes, and hand them to Father.

My parents were hard put to support their relatives in shtetls without taking loans now and then.

We were still at Mossik's when we heard unfamiliar sounds in the street outside their home. They were the tanks of the Red Army, entering in military columns; here I saw them for the first time. The surprise was great, and the changes that ensued were far-reaching. Nothing was ever the same again.

The tanks rolled into town, one after another, for several long hours. In an endless column, they stampeded down the main streets and continued westward, apparently toward the Prussian border not far away. Young soldiers stood atop the tanks, smiling and cheerful, dressed in their best uniforms covered with medals, holding bouquets of flowers. They looked as if they could not be happier to be on this mission to save us from oppression and slavery. Now we had no cause for alarm – a mighty power, under command of the most progressive government in the world, had spread over us its canopy of protection. And immediately there were enthusiastic supporters, principally Jews, who could not contain their joy, and stood in groups on street corners, waving flowers and banners, and singing songs of the Red freedom, blessing and adoring all that day and all that night. And there are those who say that on that night not only was the fate of this tiny country sealed for years to come, but also that of the Jews within it as well. The Lithuanians ground their teeth and never forgave those who exulted during the time of their distress.

The tanks did not stop thundering under our windows and I found it hard to fall asleep. I pictured them tall and powerful, like great ships on raging waves. Next day in school we compared our impressions, and each one increased the power of the steel creatures. Without hesitating, I swore that the tanks that passed our house in the night were so big that I could see them from my bed on the fourth floor.

Mother was enchanted by the coming of the Red Army. Since infancy I had heard the first notes of the anthem, the Internationale – the opening theme of the Comintern station on Radio Moscow ("H" on the panel of our old-fashioned radio). I was a loyal listener to the inspiring music that blared from our radio set, and to Mother's tidings of a day to come, a day of justice and honesty, freedom and equality for all.

The hope of salvation had now come in flesh and blood with the help of the steel monsters. What joy – seldom is a person fortunate enough to see the beginning of his dreams come true. Mother happily took me to see Gliare's *Red Poppy* ballet, and in the meantime people began to sing "*If war breaks out tomorrow, / If battle breaks out...*," to conduct aerial maneuvers, to dig public shelters, and to demonstrate the use of gas masks. A torrent of proclamations and slogans poured forth to awaken and warn, and to ward off all evil thinkers and conspirators at home and abroad. We children were forbidden to study in Hebrew schools, except in Yiddish, and even then – so decreed the new government – we had to write it without using the final forms of the Hebrew letters *nun*, *peh* and *mem*.^b Instead we were swept up in a fierce new competition: we would pursue Red soldiers and officers in the streets, begging for a *znatchok*, that is, a badge or pin, preferably one with a red star or the hammer and sickle, to display proudly on our lapels or to collect and trade.

Mother believed with all her heart that a new life had begun. Now nothing like the shocking incident that had happened last year would ever happen again. While she was working as a nurse in the Jewish hospital, two children were brought in who had suffocated to death. Their parents, both of whom had to work, had left the youngsters by themselves in a house with a leaky furnace. The children had knocked on the locked window, trying to alert passers-by to their plight, but in vain. It was hard for Mother to bear the death of children. She was convinced that under the new regime, no more people would die of want. She herself planned to write a novel to be called "Hunger", and intended to include the tragic story of the two children. I even saw her writing a few preliminary passages with a quill pen, which she dipped in an inkstand. That same year she had written to her friend Nathan, the writer who had already reached Eretz-Israel, quoting Gorky, her favorite author: "Some trees rot away slowly, others end their lives in fire. How I wish to end in flames, not in decay," not knowing how prophetic she was.

Father saw things otherwise. He kept up assiduously with happenings in Eretz-Israel, where two of his brothers and a sister had already gone. He waged a hard battle with Mother, and won it, over which school I was to attend. And when I returned from the first day of kindergarten, I told my

saddened mother – so she told me in the ghetto – “ Never mind, Mother, I’ll be a *Hebraishe yingele* (boy).”

In Mother’s vision I was to have a brilliant future in the new era. At age 17, I would finish the lyceum and go on to higher studies. All the universities of the immense new country, from the Baltic Sea to Vladivostok would be open to me, and all professions and disciplines would await my selection. The horizon was broad and bright; nothing could stop me from plucking the fruits of the intoxicating future. So what had I to do with war? The newspapers were full of accounts of battles in faraway places with names that ran all together for me, like Dunkirk and the Cyrenaica Peninsula. About the war in our back yard, the one in neighboring Poland, I heard nearly nothing, except for the great cruelty of the Germans, who dropped coins and candy that were coated with poison from planes to kill the children of Warsaw. What did I know of war?

Years later I discovered that the Red Army’s display of strength on the day it invaded Lithuania had been achieved with only a small number of tanks, which circled the town all day and night in order to impress us. Small wonder, then, our amazement a year later, when this mighty power, into whose very substance we had been incorporated and in which we put all our trust, succumbed to the first blow at dawn on the morning of the twenty-second of June, 1941, went weak at the knees and barely fought back at all.

A week before war with Germany broke out came the night of deportations. At first we didn’t know what was happening – all night large canvas-covered trucks drove through town. Lights came on in various flats; confused voices were heard, the crying of children. Something mysterious and worrying was going on around us. Brief telephone calls in the morning and rumors that flew throughout the day clarified somewhat the gloomy picture somewhat: many Jewish families had been imprisoned on Saturday night and were taken who knew where. Their sin and crime were unclear, but they appeared to have something in common – the heads of these families had been active, either socially or as Zionists. They were given an hour’s notice to prepare themselves, among them old people and children, with only the fewest of possessions. In vain were their pleas, their protests, their tears. Among those taken were well-known teachers and the principal of a prestigious school. The daughter of one of those who were exiled, he too a teacher, had been a good

friend of mine in Hebrew school. I liked her a lot. Now I tried to imagine what she was feeling; how she dealt with the fear and the shame when her family was forced out in the middle of the night; what it was like to be taken, helpless and under guard, to an unknown and threatening destination, while your friends watched you from the slits of windows.

That weekend of deportations marked the beginning of the gradual disappearance of my friends, who faded away one by one, taken and swallowed up into a final vanishing point, while I remained behind almost alone, a great and unsolved riddle within me to this very day.

So there were signs all along that war was coming. So why was nothing done, why did people stand by indifferent like the vacationers around the fainting milkmaid, passive like those around the fire chief, why?

Later I asked my father about this, one of the few questions I ever managed to ask him. He said that by that time there was nowhere to escape to and no way of escaping. Two years earlier, he recalled, German students had come to tour Lithuania; when leaving, they had attached a placard on the railroad car on which was written *WIR KOMMEN WIEDER* – we shall return.

Who could get away at the time, and where would they go? Well-connected businessmen and community leaders, had fled the country many years before. My parents not only lacked the means to travel and to obtain a visa – a visa required a substantial sum – but they were also bound by commitments and surety for loans taken both on their own behalf and for relatives. They were both the only members of their shtetl-dwelling families to have permanent jobs in the big city, so they were naturally approached for help, either in emergencies or to help someone emigrate to Eretz-Israel. And it was unthinkable to go leaving unpaid debts behind. So they stayed, trapped with no way out, and waited. And once the war began, how were they to escape with two small children, and again, where would they go? Especially since they were convinced that this was but a short episode, until the sleeping Russian giant would soon awake and return the blow, with interest, of course. Mother ends her last letter to Nathan the writer on a poetic note – she looks out of the window to the street, which is just waking from its weekly day of rest; the sounds of vehicles and wagons begin to reach her ears, and the last rays of the sun mingle with the red of the roof shingles into a burning, flaming

purple alloy. Did she feel something; is she hinting? In one of her poems from those years she is much more explicit, inspired perhaps by the civil war in Spain, which she must have followed with a great deal of sympathy:

Blood in springtime
Blood in the sun...
A drop of blood
Rolls down the white bud
– Blood!?
The tree shudders
– Always rain on its body
Now – blood!?
By what hand?
From what heart?
Murderers' hand, Blood of children
– Innocent, pure –
The drop of blood
Gnashes its teeth
Heaven is mute
In the valley of today,
The sun is still.

And rows of graves
Grow under the white tree
The white buds
Bring tears to the eye
Blood in springtime
Blood in the sun...

(Leah Greenstein, "Dos Wort", Kovno, October 7, 1936)

She knew – of course she knew. Why did she do nothing?

The first morning of the war went hazily by, refusing to clear. Explosions grew more frequent; columns of smoke rose and came near. Maneuvers? The radio continued to spout inanities, but the street woke up early and convulsed;

trucks roared by frequently; motorcycles went by in relays, things the like of which had never happened on-a Sunday morning.

Across the street, in flats confiscated from priests, lived the families of Russian officers. At a certain moment, we discovered a flurry of activity – curtains removed, chandeliers detached from the ceiling. Through the naked windows a feverish packing activity into large crates was revealed. Another glance led to a truck parked nearby, into which the Russians carried their belongings. So the situation must have really been serious then. Sioma the student also lives in our flat. Today, his brother is visiting him for the weekend, and they begin to fear their plans are about to be ruined. And Mother isn't home.

For the thousandth time, I leafed through the previous day's *Ogonyok*, the well-known and colorful official weekly, searching in vain for a clue to the events unfolding around us. That week there were photographs of decorated Stakhanovites,^{*c} next to praise for the brilliant progress of the Five-Year Plan; nor did I find, any explanation for the Russian families' hasty packing in the report on the courageous pilots, climbing with a broad smile into their fighter planes,. What's going on here? And what should we do and what'll happen, and why don't they announce something? And Mother isn't home.

So the hours crept by, the radio remained close-mouthed, and at a certain moment anti-aircraft guns started firing, causing great alarm. The short bursts seemed aimed directly at our windows. Sirens sounded from distant suburbs. Through the window, in the distance above the airport somewhat toward the south, I saw a bizarre dance of airplanes. Like the up-and-down movement of the needle of my mother's new Singer sewing machine, they started diving and climbing in alternation. Tiny bulbs sprayed around them, and black smoke mushroomed in their wake, exploding upwards. Whose planes were these, and who was chasing after them? Were they actually enemy planes that had come this far? And if so, shouldn't we be staying away from the windows, and heading for the cellars, heeding the national guard, who of late had been filling our ears with drills of alarm?

Father didn't know what to do. In the meantime he preferred to lie down on the sofa reading a book, while my little sister maneuvered between Sioma's room, who loved to humor her, and curling into Father's lap. Two fingers of

her left hand stuck in her mouth, her right hand forever twisting her curly hair. Her teeth had left sharp lines on the upper joint of her middle fingers; I warned her again and again that they would fall off if she kept on sucking them, just as my parents had warned me that my pee-pee would fall off if I kept playing with it. My father, a historian, whose thesis was on the Spanish Inquisition, was now reading Dubnov's *Chronicles of the Jewish People*. Eight months later, Father was exiled to Riga, Dubnov's home town, and in the days to come he would describe his doings there, including a chronicle of the great historian's last days.

If Father had taken us both under his arms at that moment, like an animal saving its offspring and like Lot, had escaped eastward without looking left or right, we might all have remained alive. Somehow we might have made it into the heart of the USSR, and ever-vigorous Mother would certainly have managed to follow us.

At one or two o'clock in the afternoon Foreign Minister Molotov gave a statement at the top of the news, informing the nation of the low and despicable act that had taken place that morning. With no forewarning or stated cause, the Germans, only yesterday allies, had begun to attack along the broad front of our western border. But the brave Red Army, backed by the entire Soviet people, would retaliate and repel with all their strength the forces of evil that had so treacherously invaded our homeland. All were called upon to raise the banner, to report, each to his post, and be vigilant until final victory was achieved.

Immediately we began applying strips of cloth to the windowpanes using a white flour paste, as instructed by the national guard. Someone braved the risk of climbing up to the attic above us to make sure that a barrel of water and sandbags had been stored there, again in obedience to instructions.

In that same issue of *Ogonyok*, my eyes had been drawn to a new device for locating airplanes, an apparatus of interlocked horizontal and vertical pipes that could hear and see over distance. Thanks to this important invention, the article said, our forces could now detect the approach of enemy airplanes from far away. I hoped that since morning they had already managed to equip every unit of the Red Army in our area with these miraculous devices.

In the meantime I was shooed away from the window for fear of “shrapnels”. I imagined these shrapnels as something like flying snakes, scurrying and looping through the air until they found their victim. Sioma’s brother gave me sounder advice – whenever I heard a siren I should get under a doorframe, a relatively safe place to be in case a bomb fell – *bomba* in our language, a word with a heavy and frightening sound. No bombs fell in our neighborhood, but from that time onward I spent hours skipping from doorway to doorway, trying to guard myself against a direct hit and staying out of the path of a flying shrapnel. In retrospect I think it was then I began my personal escape journey, which in time would lead me beyond rivers and seas.

All morning there were many sirens; later in the day, people grew tired of sounding them. In the morning, the anti-aircraft guns roared loudly; later their strength waned. This trend gave an opening to Father, whose humor in hard times we came to appreciate. The anti-aircraft guns were known as “Zeniths,” which he turned into “Ze nit un her nit,” Yiddish for “see nothing, hear nothing.” The initials of the Soviet Republic (SSSR), which had seemed a mighty power until the night before, but which was apparently paralyzed that morning, became “S’iz nit geven, S’iz nito, S’vet nit zain, Redt zich nisht ein,” which means “Never was, isn’t now, never will be – don’t kid yourself.” An excellent trait, my father’s black humor. Later, it came to his aid even in the death camps.

The explosions came nearer and multiplied. Fighter planes dared to venture into the skies of the city itself, and the anti-aircraft guns seemed to choke with rage and anger. The walls and frames of the house seemed brittle, and my wide window ledge held dangers. Clearly, in a matter of minutes the bombs would be falling on us. Even so, Father hesitated to take us down to the Meltzer family one story below. He didn’t like to bother people and ask favors of them, he said. But go we did, thus entering their affluent flat for the first time. Their grandson, Mishka Kapulsky, was my classmate – a mischievous boy, first in every prank, and a permanent resident of the punishment corner in the classroom. Once his grandfather, who owned the bakery on the ground floor, took me with them on a business trip. We rode in a black taxi to sawmills and flour mills outside the city. Their thick-walled flat exuded comfort and security. Even the racket of guns sounded muffled there, and less threatening.

Mishka's mother, a pretty young divorced woman, served us tea and biscuits as if we had come on a social call. For a moment a faint hope rose within me that everything might yet return to its usual course. It was easier to believe so in the Meltzers' home.

Father brought us news from time to time as he climbed up and down between our flats, his anxiety growing. What was happening with Mother? We had heard nothing from her, nor did the phone ring. In the meantime, Uncle David had arrived with his bicycle. David was upset and confused. What would happen to the teachers' conference scheduled for tomorrow? Perhaps he should call and find out. When we were allowed back up to our flat for a short time in the evening, before we were hurried back downstairs, I caught a quick glimpse of the intriguing belongings our uncle had brought with him, now arranged on the shelf we had cleared for him in our closet – shirts and towels neatly folded, razor and scented soaps, cologne, cufflinks, combs, ties and tie clips, all tidily packed, in a way I had never before seen in my house – apparently bought specially for this vacation.

Finally we got good news. Mother had returned at last and would soon come down. She entered in a flurry, excited by all that had happened to her, still incredulous. The day before she had set out on a riverboat with the children to the OZE^{*d} camp. They arrived, settled in, and prepared the summer camp routine. But early in the morning they woke to the roar of airplanes, the sounds of guns and bombs, and didn't know what to do. They tried calling the city and the camp management, but there was no answer. The staff was left alone with the responsibility for several dozen children. They decided to try to return immediately to the city. But how to accomplish this? Then like a fairy godmother the riverboat appeared, still sticking to its prescribed schedule. The captain was hesitant about taking so many children on board on such a day. They begged, pleaded, promised him extra payment, and at last he agreed. They sailed before the confused children could learn the meaning of their sudden return. The adults did their best to calm them, pretending all was well, although the banks of the river teemed with sights of war – a burned vehicle spewing smoke, shots and explosions on all sides. While they were still sailing, just outside the city, German planes burst over them. They took a daring gamble by herding all of the children onto the deck, urging them to

wave at the planes with their white hats. The first plane dived down and approached the boat; they held their breath. The children waved to the fighter plane, which, at the very last minute, when it was very close to the boat, turned aside and climbed back skyward. Are German pilots heartless? Upon discovering that children were on deck, they spared the boat. Only a few days later I found it hard to believe our innocence in accepting Mother's version of events. During the rest of their journey home, they saw the bombers dive down bridges, attack roads and structures, with only occasional fire being directed back at them.

The Russians seemed to be in full retreat from all directions. The city's entrances were blocked with cars and carriages, and panic and tumult reigned. Mother and the children were lucky to have been on a boat; otherwise they might never have made it into the city. As soon as they docked they had to contact parents and find cars to bring every last child home, and it had not been easy. That was why, even though she had been in the city for several hours, she was able only to come home now, her sense of responsibility for the children in her care having taken precedence. Did any of them survive the coming years? A painful and pointless question.

Mother's arrival cleared things up somewhat. Now we could attempt to decide what to do – should we stay, or flee? The question was based on an illogical assumption – but what was logical in the events of that day? – namely, that the Russians might retreat beyond our city. If so, we should flee as fast as possible. Like the contraction of a muscle grown taut in time of danger, Mother began bundling together a number of things that seemed at that moment most necessary: she took several items of food from the pantry, which was almost empty in anticipation of our upcoming summer holiday; and she dressed us in our best and warmest clothes, even though it was high summer.

After fifteen minutes, the activity ceased, the hands slackened – perhaps because it was so hard to decide what to take and what to leave, and especially where to go, and how to get there with two small children. On the roads there was danger of attacks from both the German planes and the Lithuanians. The German border was so close – they had only to force a crack in the Soviet wall, and in an instant our tiny country would be overrun,

with us stuck somewhere behind, on the roads or in the forest. What was the point of running? So it was decided: we would stay. Mother put things back in their places and announced that we would move to the cellar. Thus it sometimes happens that fate is decided in an instant, nor can we ever know whether the decision is the right one for the given moment.

Two storage rooms were ours to use. The deeper one was in our building, in a catacomb-like cellar, dark and labyrinthine, doubtless used in the past by the ancient monastery above it. In this storage room we kept things we didn't need. The other storeroom was beneath a modern building, which had been erected in the center of the large courtyard. There we had a nice little ventilated room, where a little light could even reach us from outside. But it was narrow; on the floor were remnants of coal from last winter; and to reach it we had to cross the exposed yard. Like a mother cat carrying her litter of kittens in her teeth from place to place, my parents trooped with us a few times back and forth, until Mother made up her mind, perhaps with Father's concurrence, that the first storeroom was better – although it was moldy and damp, dark and depressing, it had the advantage of being deep, and was situated below our flat. From now on, during most of the days to come, we became residents of this cellar; at least we children and Mother did.

A child's memory: what do I really know about what happened? Have I investigated, collected documents, taken testimonies? What then can I tell, other than what has infiltrated and reached me, absorbed and adapted by a child whose senses were very sharp, it is true, but who would still be only eleven years at the end of the war. No scientific journal would accept my testimony for publication – but this is my story.

There was no point in escaping, or indeed any place to go, after six in the evening of the second day of war. That is the general conclusion people reached later, after analyzing and reanalyzing the sequence of events, trying to grasp and digest for the thousandth time just what took place.

Sioma the student and his brother, young and apparently independent, began talking of escape from about noon of the first day. They wavered throughout the first day, and were still not gone on the morning of the second.

Scene: Monday afternoon. Sioma is sprawled on his back on the sofa in his room, in a kind of paralyzed torpor. It is clear he has no desire to move from

here, but apparently he must go. My four-year-old sister stretches herself upon his stomach and, as if reading his thoughts, is whispering with soft, kittenish charm, "Don't go, Sioma, don't leave." *End of scene.*

Within a matter of hours, Sioma and his brother suddenly shook themselves out of their lassitude and got up and left. His room was left neat and tidy, and on his clean drawing table lay a row of sharpened pencils. Sioma also played the violin – where was the violin? Later we were glad to hear that at six p.m. on Monday the last train had still managed to leave our city for the east. There was a chance that Sioma and his brother may have gotten away at the last minute, and were now far away from here. But – it seems to me it was Wednesday – suddenly the telephone rang. This alarmed us – a telephone call, these days? It was Sioma, calling from the house of relatives here in the city. Yes, they had set out, were delayed, and here they were again. He was just able to ask how we were when the telephone call was cut off. We never heard from him again. In the ghetto we didn't see him or his brother again.

Uncle David and his friend, who had come for the teachers' conference, hurried home that Monday morning. They cycled along the country's main road toward their shtetl in the northeast. They left most of their handsome new possessions, now of no use to them, packed in our closet. Survivors from their village knew of two teachers who left on their bicycles for the big city on the first day of the war, but never came back.

More and more troops were retreating through our streets. Already early in the morning, the first wagons had appeared, a little sheepishly at first, but in the next few hours their numbers grew. As at Catholic funerals, here too the soldiers plodded slowly along, surrounding the wagons, which were also bedecked in fresh branches like green shrouds. At first I did not understand why they covered themselves with cut branches, as if they were playing a big Scout game. Years later, I would remember this scene while watching a procession during the Feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) in my kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley: the jubilant wagons, adorned in green, and the song "Our Baskets on Our Shoulders" on the lips of those seated on the wagon. But these wagons were gloomy and their horses were very tired, most of them dragging a cannon or mortar behind them like a piece of useless junk.

As the hours passed, the stream of wagons grew. It was a huge army, retreating in a kind of anti-march. Where were the triumphal tanks of the year before? As the hours passed, the soldiers' heads hung lower, holding on to the sides of wagons like drowning men clutching at straws. In groups and alone they moved like shadows, oblivious of the explosions and sirens. More and more of the plodding soldiers were bandaged, and through the tarps of the wagons, which were pulled by tired horses and which now had red crosses drawn on the sides in an untrained hand, stretchers could be seen, dangling legs in every direction.

And when we finally understood that this was war indeed, and that we were in the middle of it, did I see much of it? On the morning of the first day I still mustered the courage to look out a little. As the day wore on, it became too frightening. From that point I only heard the war from the depths of the cellar, curled up, wrapped, and tense, with eyes shut and ears wide, wide open, filling the entire space.

It was damp and stifling in the cellar. That is where, I once thought, the flood waters would rise to drown us. A long obstructed passageway, a dim light bulb, a row of compartments. Towards evening, we tried going back up to our flat, but the strong volleys of shots, the incessant explosions, and the flames that started to crown the broad horizon around in glowing scarlet sent us scurrying back down. There at least we didn't see anything. Mother brought blankets down and we made room for ourselves among pots and old baby carriages. Even through the thick walls of the cellar we could feel the din of wagons which, like those festive tanks, never stopped moving all night long. These were the much-reduced remnants of a defeated army.

(**) Photoprint Offset Agency, Inc., in Givat Ram. Seated on a tall revolving chair, I look out of the wide window on the hills of Jerusalem spread around me, waiting for the copier to finish a print of an ancient map by Matthew Paris from the year 1230, featured in a huge historical atlas that we have at home. Our soldier son, who is home on short leave, helped me retrieve the atlas from the shelter beneath our house. Even in Jerusalem we have a shelter in our building. I also obtained another book, a very rare one, on temporary loan from the National Library; it describes a siege during the Crusades. On the right are decapitated heads displayed on spearheads outside Acre's gates; on

the left, captives imprisoned in cells, awaiting their doom. I sit here on my revolving chair, waiting for the completion of the copy work, which I need for an article about the history of the Crusades, and wonder how, only a short while ago, at my writing table at home in the early morning hours of a summer day, we were still lying in the chambers of our cellar of our house there, awaiting our doom during the first days of the war. And now Matthew Paris, the siege of Acre, the offset plates. How to deal with these sudden transitions? For so many years I had ignored my burden, and my hand – the hand of a professional editor who makes a living from scribbling – would grow heavy as lead, unable at times to scratch so much as a letter on the blank page beneath it.

In fact, my real story is the one happening as I write, the story of my attempts to gradually open my bundles of memory, and continue functioning at the same time, to be “all right”, alert and ready to go, so that I should never be taken by surprise. Never to stop, never to hesitate, like the morning when I crossed the river, only to march straight ahead, as Mother told me. Only thus is there any hope of survival or rescue. (**)

That Monday night, as we were preparing for another night in the cellar, an immense explosion occurred, dwarfing all others before it; and immediately another explosion followed. The very molecules of air seemed to break into bits, as if our house were crumbling above our heads, or the earth were shaking and opening up. We later discovered that it was the two main bridges over the two rivers of the city, on both sides of our house, being blown up by the Russians one after the other. It was six in the evening, the second day of the war. They had not spared even their own people, so we heard. When the explosions went off, the bridges were full of vehicles and people. They now had no chance of joining their own forces and returning to their homeland.

(**) Today, on urgent reserve duty, gliding like an albatross, gazing like a hawk from an immense height. I look into their houses and peer into their yards, snoop in their fields, and sniff their mountains. Prepared and alert, I observe their constantly increasing strength. With professional detachment I count the factory chimneys that have been added, new roads that have been paved, electric lines and water pipes that have doubled in number. Will war come again, will it suddenly break out yet again?

I estimate the volume of underground fuel reservoirs, wondering about piles of concealed ammunition. Who are they for? How long will they last? I try to peep under sheds and camouflage nets – are new cannons hidden there, are tanks ready to emerge? For years I have been deciphering military aerial photographs. Like ancient diviners examining the liver of a young calf, I bend over the stereoscope, examining the minute clues sketched in the emulsion of the film before me. Like those haruspices, I too look for signs and portents, trying to prognosticate events before they materialize. Thus I can be on constant lookout, observing the horizon for events still beyond it, know in advance things that may happen before too long. As I have said, I no longer like surprises. Those bronze shell casings that fell onto the grass of the tennis courts in the resort were early omens that continue to affect my life to this day, like a long-sustained underlying bass note.

Commander Gil has just walked into my military office. Broad-shouldered, tall, with clear, warm eyes. The skin of his face and hands is shriveled like that of an old man, the result of serious burns received during one of the wars. With an uneasiness that he cannot disguise he tells me he has just been instructed to have a talk with the senior reservists. I see his discomfort on his face – on the one hand, he needs experienced people like myself, who increase his confidence in his own job. On the other hand, the army is cutting back, wishing to clear posts and offices for younger soldiers. For the first time I felt, like an old sphinx, the weight of my years, and of thirty-five years of soldiering in the reserves. Now that my own son is among the draftees, perhaps I've done enough – perhaps I may be permitted to begin closing the circle.^(**)

The noise of the loud explosions that evening signaled that nothing would return to the way it was before. The sounds changed over the next few days: fewer explosions and more shots; less in the air, more on the ground. Fighter planes stopped flying overhead; cannon fire was not heard. From rooftops and corners peered the heads of Lithuanians, who enthusiastically took potshots at the remnants of the Red Army.

On one of the first days of war, Father burst into the cellar, white as chalk, unable to calm himself. He had been burning documents alone in the flat, erasing and tearing away, when a rain of gunshots came at an angle through the window, spraying the ceiling above him. While he was still recovering from

his fright, the outer door was pummeled with rifle butts, and in burst some Lithuanians, their rifles ready, their eyes glaring with hostility: "Hands up! Where are the Russians who fired at us just now!" Angrily they swept through the whole flat, their fingers still on the trigger – it was from here and only here, they insisted, that someone had shot at them. Father barely managed to stammer in his elegant Lithuanian that it couldn't be; that he was alone here, a senior teacher at a public school, preparing his lessons for the coming school year; his family was in the country and no one else was around. It is not clear how much they understood of his trembling words, but they ran out, cursing loudly, without harming him. After recovering somewhat, he came down to us, still weak kneed. We must say the Benediction on Deliverance, he said. This time he stayed with us for a few hours, and when it seemed to him that things had settled down outside a bit, he went back upstairs to continue burning his papers – for who knew what tomorrow would bring.

We remained holed up in the cellar. We could do nothing but wait, and wait some more.

On Wednesday a bizarre silence reigned. We felt it even in the depths of the cellar, as soon as we woke from our sleep. There were no shots; no sounds of people running or wagon wheels turning. Silence all around; our very breathing stopped: what silence was this?

Little by little out of the silence came distant, unfamiliar sounds, approaching ever nearer and nearer. It was not the roar of engines or the thunder of planes. The sound grew louder and more distinct. At first we didn't believe our ears – it was all so at odds with the circumstances – it was the sound of singing. Sharp and distinct, the song of troops coming from the distance into the city. Not with the gallop of horses or the rolling of tanks. As in the days of Assyria, of Rome, of Alexander the Great – row by row, rank upon rank, the conquerors approached in a slow march, heavy but measured, while singing their undoubtedly ancient soldiers' hymn:

Ah li la lo la la

Ah li la lo la la

Thus they had sung in the Franco-Prussian War, during the First World War, and only a few months ago in Poland, Belgium, and France. To this day it still haunts me; I can write its score:

Ah li la lo la la

Ah li la lo la.la

Platoon by platoon, each marching and singing the same song.
Consequently, the music reached our ears in discordant, chaotic notes, like
the waves of a river when boats move past one another.

Ah li la lo la la

Ah li la lo la la...

With might and self-assurance, pride and mastery: the victory song of
the conquerors, new lords of the land.

The city lay submissive beneath their feet.

And we, down below, deep in the cellar, held our breath like helpless cubs.

Ready, attentive, waiting. They have come, they are here. What does their
song of celebration mean for us?

That's how it began.

**Notes:*

*a - A series of forts from World War I surrounded the city and some of them, in particular the
Seventh and Ninth Fort, were used by the Germans and Lithuanians to execute the Jews.

.....
*b - Some of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet - khaf, mem, nun, tsadi, and peh - have
special forms at the end of the word.

*c - A Soviet distinction for workers who had shown special industry, after the coal miner
Alexei Stakhanov.

*d - OZE – International Jewish Communal Health Association

(**) – "Intern dialogue" – to consider different orthography

Summer

The First Days

A new day broke and we, deep in our cellar, held our breath; the Germans had indeed arrived. We remained there for a few days more; only our parents emerged from time to time. Later, even we children dared to return to our flat, feeling somewhat ill at ease, exposed upstairs on the fourth floor; by contrast, the dark cellar seemed warmer and safer.

The war machine passed like a mighty storm beneath our windows. I overcame my aversion and forced myself to look at a map of the battles of late June 1941. The map swarms with arrows shooting relentlessly forward like cobras, leaving besieged pockets here and there, evidence of minute and futile efforts to halt the raging flood. The “North” group of German armies (the 16th and 18th, together with four tank brigades), swept north of our city and crushed the Russian 8th Army in our area, while south of us, the “Central” group of armies (the 4th and 9th Armies, with five tank brigades) pulverized the Russian 11th Army. Within two weeks of the outbreak of war, the front was far to the east, and we were far behind it.

Although the front was moving off, the shooting never ceased. News flowed in from all sides, at first hard to believe – they were shooting Jews. Lithuanians were going from home to home, especially in the ancient quarter of Slobodka, across the river, slaughtering entire families with knives and hatchets, as in the days of Chmielnicki.*^a

There were also kidnappings. People who left on simple errands would cross a street on their way home and seem to be swallowed by the earth. Some were ordered to report for conscript labor and never returned. Hundreds, thousands, were gathered during those first weeks of war and were never heard of again. Rumors spoke of concentrations of prisoners on the outskirts of various cities being held in the withering July heat without water or food. It looked as if the Lithuanians had begun settling their old accounts with the Jews.

My friend Mossik’s father was among those arrested. And Abrasha, Arke and Maimke’s father also disappeared, arrested while they were returning from a failed attempt to flee during the war’s first days,. I remembered how, during

one of the previous summers at camp, while teaching his own sons to ride a bicycle, he made noble efforts to teach me to ride as well, but in vain.

I know the last photograph of those who were taken to the Seventh Fort, in the eastern part of the city. Crowded and jumbled together, they stand there in long rows – about six thousand of them – their ID cards in hand, ostensibly waiting to be sorted and classified. They are like those, perhaps, who quietly waited at Babi Yar, ignorant of what was happening on the other side of the rampart, and thus in many other places as well. No explicit information ever reached their families, who continued to wait for their loved ones during the coming years, seizing upon every scrap of rumor, refusing to be comforted.

What is “Germans”? And why did this name frighten us so? My mother’s family came from the region of Kurland on the Baltic Coast, which is saturated with German culture. During the First World War, thanks to the German conquest, she had studied in German in a good elementary school, and she knew many German songs and poems.

Once in the ghetto she returned in good spirits from a day’s hard labor felling trees in the forest. They happened to be accompanied by an elderly German sentry, with whom Mother had had a good talk – she had even sung one of her childhood songs to him, only to discover it was a song he had learned as a child as well. Together the two of them, prisoner and guard, sang *O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, / wie grün sind deine Blätter* (O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how green are your leaves). For a moment my mother almost felt human again, that all was not lost after all. Much later, I was surprised to hear that melody in one of Mozart’s violin concertos: he, too, was – for me - German.

Most of the Germans moved on, leaving behind military patrols wearing steel helmets whose profile freezes my blood to this day. With them, a new and terrifying entity swept in – the Gestapo. At times they went out hunting with lists made out in advance; their dungeons swallowed people all the time – No Jew returned alive from there. Alongside the Gestapo new units appeared, wearing especially frightening uniforms – black lapels, brown lapels, the skull and crossbones on their caps. A regime that flaunts a death-head! And everywhere, whenever one dared to lift his eyes, was the swastika, a symbol

of brutal and terrifying violence, flapping high atop poles, menacing from the insignia on armbands. Still, on one of the first days, an old Feld^{weibel} (field sergeant) entered our yard. In a panic, we children scattered to all sides, but he calmed us with his questions. It seemed he was a medic on the way to the front. He wanted to know how we were and what was lacking. When he heard that Jews were forbidden to buy food in the customary stores, he took some of us to the nearby bakery, where he paid for several loaves of hot bread with his own money, bidding us share it among ourselves. We were amazed and jubilant: look, here were Germans of the kind my mother remembered. How then to gauge the degree of danger around us, the antelopes asked each other, while predators gazed upon them from the surrounding bushes, their faces sealed.

Salvos of commands fell on everyone. It was forbidden to own weapons of any kind, military equipment or radios. Hiding soldiers were to be handed over, to give information about collaborators with the previous regime. It was forbidden to send signals, to make broadcasts, to leave lights in windows at night, to possess incendiary newspapers or literature, and on and on. The orders were signed by the Kommandant of the city, who had a new, markedly Germanic name, *KAUEN*. To these were added special orders targeting only Jews – they were forbidden to leave the city, to use radios or telephones, permitted to shop in only a few stores, to be in the streets only during certain hours. It was strictly and absolutely forbidden to enter certain areas of government offices and military installations, and more. All of the decrees and orders were worded with the same brutal ending, hard to stomach or grow used to: “Violators of this regulation will be shot” –

...*WIRD ERSCHOSSEN WERDEN* – plain and simple.

Besides the harshness of these orders, Jews could feel a certain relief – the period of chaos and wild bloodshed sustained by the Lithuanians came to an end. From this time on there was a master, a sovereign, whose commands and decrees, although severe, and whose voice, although offensive and violent, nevertheless made a clear demarcation between what was permitted and what was forbidden. It was, after all, a regime that gloried in the slogan “law and order.”

Jews continued to be shot, however. In the streets, in the doorways of houses, through lighted windows, from unexpected distances. From here on and for three years to come, and in addition to massacres and organized killings, shootings were almost a matter of daily routine. The daring few who tried at first to protest, and who sought meetings with the Kommandant to appeal in person this decree or that, in general never returned. Or, at best, they were indeed returned, beaten and bruised, so that everyone around them would learn the lesson of the nature of the new procedures now in effect.

The first days of limiting the sale of food to Jews were a treat for us children, especially for those whose features were not outstandingly Jewish. For want of a better alternative, my parents now had to depend on me, to treat me as a valuable partner. As soon as I saw that the butcher shop across the road had received supplies, I left the house – once, twice, even a third time, at intervals, to buy whatever was being sold in rations. From the butcher shop nearby I would rush to other shops in the area, though without straying too far, and buy whatever I could at these places, too. So it was, thanks to my excursions, that different kinds of foods and sausages reached our table, the likes of which we had never seen even during ordinary times – as long as the Soviet currency was still accepted. For a brief span I was the family's provider, and I was proud beyond measure. Before long, however, these trips became too dangerous, and my brief days of glory ended.

In Jerusalem, I love setting off to work on foot at dawn. These morning walks in the cool air clear the veins and cleanse the spirit. Pathetic attempts, perhaps, to recapture that first, intoxicating walk in the morning with Mother into the city, before the war. We were on our way to the municipal bus station at an early hour, before buses had begun to run. The streets were still sleepy and empty, with industrious janitors scrubbing and washing the sidewalks in front of houses. I was utterly amazed that we could walk unhindered through the main avenue of the city, and proud that Mother could rely on me to rise early and walk so far. The last time we spent a whole day together was in Zhezhmer, the shtetl where Aunt Libeh and Uncle Shmuel – they too both teachers of Hebrew – lived with my cousins Rivkah and Zionah.

During the first days of the war this municipal bus station was the site of one of the cruelest massacres in our city. Lithuanians herded scores of Jews into

the Lietukis garage and beat them with any piece of iron that came to hand – bars, keys, hammers, and screwdrivers. None was left alive. The streams of blood were washed and scrubbed from the cement floor with the hoses used to wash the buses.

A few days after the new military regime was established, Jews were prohibited from walking on the sidewalks. Jews were ordered to march in single file and, when meeting any German soldier or other uniformed person, to lower their heads and remove their hats, which they were obliged from this time forth to wear. I remember being unable to sleep the evening the order was issued. Would people really obey such a humiliating command? Morning came, and through the drawn curtains of the wide window, I followed what went on outside. For the first few hours, no Jews were on the streets, as if they were putting off their errands for as long as possible; but later, one by one, figures with bowed heads began to appear, passing rapidly as ordered on the sides of the road, as if pursued by demons. In the days that followed, we became accustomed to it as a matter of course. Sometimes, as a prank, I would try to get around the rule, , by emerging from our yard in a long diagonal line towards the walk on the other side of the street, so that by the time I reached the opposite gutter I was already at the gate of the friend I was going to visit.

It was not always possible to circumvent the rule – Lithuanians were on guard, eager to be hard on the Jews. Mother returned home one day and said, with a wry smile, "I got what I had coming to me." A year or so earlier – she had come home excited on that day, too – a gypsy woman had been brought to give birth at the hospital where Mother worked. "No longer to crouch on the ground among clods of earth and filth / under black canvas tents or the starlit skies," wrote my mother elatedly, several weeks after the event, in the last of her poems published by the newspaper. "In a soft bed will you bear your child / between white sheets," she continued, in praise of the new, enlightened regime. On that day, a gypsy woman had caught my errant mother taking a few steps on the sidewalk, and had upbraided her with sharp words and insults.

(**)My daily morning walk in Jerusalem leads me ever inward. Streets turn to paths, walls of stone close upon you. I catch glimpses of spacious inner

courtyards, whitewashed and decorated with potted plants, exuding a quiet and dim coolness. A green lemon tree, sane and tranquil, awakens a latent yearning. An uncontrollable thought rises – “If I must hide, let it be here; surely they can't reach here.”(**)

A flood of rumors and news overwhelmed us. News about what happened to Jews elsewhere, rumors about what was to become of us here. In the meantime we were told that without exception every Jew must, wear the yellow Star of David from now on, one on the left side of the breast, the other on the right side of the back. The order included precise measurements and even a sketch, with instructions as to how the patch should look and the materials from which it must be made. Nor was this all; in a few days, another order came, repeating emphatically that the patch must be sewn on, in permanent stitching, and must be on every article of clothing, outer and inner layers alike. Nothing was left out.

First the order to use the edge of the road; then the order to wear the yellow star; later came the order to move to a special ghetto – the actions seemed to be taken straight out of Father's history books. Mother sat down at her Singer and stitched yellow patches for us all. Since finishing a course in cutting and sewing, Mother had made all of our clothing on the machine, her own as well. How excited we all were when they first brought the sewing machine into the house! Where it ended up I do not know – I do not recall it with us in the ghetto.

The first days wearing the Stars of David passed uncomfortably enough, as if we had been branded with the mark of Cain. But in time we grew so accustomed to them that, when I looked out through the ghetto fence at passers-by on the other side, I would take the absence of a yellow patch on their clothes as a defect of some sort, like a bland dish of food without seasoning.

I try sometimes to recall the stage at which we began to understand – and take for granted – that from here on all Jews were considered degenerate creatures, fourth- and fifth-class beings who could only expect as natural the degrading attitude they received from Germans and Lithuanians alike. The change was rapid, and brought about a tacit division of roles between the two sides, as if by consensus – one side to oppress, one to be humiliated. Slowly,

like a bent sapling, Jews bowed their heads, and the signs of resistance grew fewer. Later, it was not an uncommon sight in the ghetto to see two or three guards unaided, driving tens and hundreds of Jews – arranged in rows – for long distances, compelling them to do the most contemptible tasks they could think of, encountering not the least sign of resistance or revolt.

The summer dragged on, in spite of the war. There was no more talk of summer camp, rivers, or sailing. Everyone withdrew into his corner and waited fearfully for the next blow to fall. Everyone looked cautiously around to see who was left and who was missing.

Many people turned out to be missing during the first days, and the lives of others changed in an instant. On the eve of the war aunt Bertha came with her husband, for a weekend of shopping for furniture for their new apartment in our city. Her husband, the successful manager of a bank in their distant town, had just gotten a new job, and their entire family was about to move in the next few days. The two children had been left in the care of Bertha's younger sister, who had persuaded them to go alone and not to worry. On Sunday morning, as soon as the explosions started, the parents spoke to her by telephone before they were cut off forever. My friend Rina had come with her parents from distant Eretz-Israel to spend the summer with her grandparents in our city, and here they were trapped. Sonya had just been born about the time war broke out, and she spent her entire early childhood in forests on her mother's back. The stories of my friends Dvorah and Shlomith are even more complex.

Several weeks of confusion and growing anxiety went by. Prominent people among the Jewish population were rushed to the city's central command, and under direct threats were told to assemble a committee to represent the Jews to the authorities, "for their own good.". Their insistence that they were not sanctioned to represent anybody and had no authority to undertake the office was to no avail. Objections because of ill health and fresh bereavement were rejected as well. For lack of other options a number of brave men, Dr. Elkes especially, shouldered the burden of representing the rest,. These representatives were called the *Altestenrat*, the council of elders. From now on they had to summon all their strength to appear before the Germans and do their bidding, making cautious attempts at negotiations. They never knew,

when attending these meetings, whether they would return; they said the prayer of *vidui* (deathbed confession) before they went.

The message delivered to them by the rulers was clear and unequivocal – full cooperation through absolute obedience. Nothing bad would happen to law-abiding people; the supreme goal of the regime was to harness the entire population to the massive war effort. The massacres of Jews to date had been carried out by Lithuanians and extremists only, not at the initiative of the Germans; people who were jailed were communists and sympathizers. All the others who seemed to have disappeared had been taken to work near the front, and their families would soon receive postcards from them. Cooperate, suggested the rulers, and not a hair on your head would be harmed.

And what of the shtetls? We were greatly concerned for the fate of our families there, but we knew nothing. As we learned later, members of the death squads, the Einsatz-Gruppen (operational detachments) reached hundreds of villages and shtetls during the first months of the occupation, systematically executing Jews in towns and villages, one after the other. There were four Einsatz-Gruppen in all of Eastern Europe. Each of them consisted of four death squads (Sonder-Kommandos), whose members were recruited and trained in the months before war. A few hundred Germans only, they reaped the first great harvest of death. In our region, it was Sonder-Kommando 3 of Einsatz-Gruppe A, a few dozen Germans in all, who conducted the execution of tens of thousands of Jews in the shtetls. Their work was made easy thanks to the willing and eager help they received from Lithuanians, who in effect carried out the German objectives. Nor was our area peculiar in this respect – squads of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians served as contractors for the murder of Jews throughout Eastern Europe and throughout the war.

They rounded up the Jews in my grandfather's village and locked them in the synagogue, the mighty stronghold of normal times. Now its windows showed the jeering, hate-filled faces of their former neighbors. Such were the Lithuanians, whose ancestors were still worshipping Perkunas, the god of lightning, when Maimonides published his monumental works. For generations Jews and Lithuanians had lived together door by door, making deals and asking after each other's health. Now the concealed enmity burst

forth and knew no bounds. At Grandfather's synagogue, from time to time one or another of the besiegers would squeeze up to the window and announce to the petrified prisoners that soon they would be killed, one by one. And so it was; several days later they took all the men to pits prepared for them in a distant grove, the one by the railroad station.

My grandfather had a special place by the eastern wall of the synagogue, and a place of honor next to him was made for us, his family from the city. On Sabbath and the holy days I spent hours beside him moving freely among the waves of prayer shawls, rising and falling like a wind-swept ocean. With undisguised curiosity, the village children would surround me, the grandson of their Rabbi, studying me, wondering what stuff I was made of. Once, when they were cross-examining me about the size of the city I came from, one of them exclaimed, "But your city can't be as big as our priest's apple orchard."

And now my grandmother, together with all the women and children, including my cheerful inquisitive friends, were imprisoned in that synagogue for three more weeks after the men had been murdered. The sole survivor reported how the women prayed ceaselessly in front of the ark and scrolls of the Torah, but to no avail. On the Ninth of Av^b – of all days – they were taken, this time in wagons, to the same grove by the railway station, and there they were dispatched in the same manner as the men. The Jews of the neighboring shtetls met their end in the same killing pits; among them, by chance, were the grandparents of my wife Miriam, from the shtetl Nemoksht.

On the eve of the war my extended family included seven families – twenty-nine souls in five shtetls and one city, not counting the large branch of the family in nearby Belorussia. In the end, of them all, only two survived.

* * *

The front receded farther and farther away. Intoxicated by their success, the Germans galloped deep into Russia. The vision of the Thousand-Year- Reich began to materialize rapidly. It became harder and harder to hope for any significant change in the near future. Thus even Jews saw the order to move to a special ghetto as a plausible or at least possible necessity. The Germans asserted that this was the only way they could guarantee the safety and possessions of our people from additional pogroms on the part of the Lithuanians.

The Germans allotted a month to complete the move. At first everything happened slowly, as no one was in a hurry to go. The area set aside for the ghetto was the old Jewish suburb Slobodka, which had grown up across the river in the preceding centuries as a typical Jewish shtetl at the entrance to the city. To it they annexed an adjacent quarter on the east, where Lithuanians lived in wooden houses surrounded by gardens. These two neighborhoods were set aside for all the Jews of the city. The Lithuanians were ordered to vacate their houses and lots and to exchange them for the flats of Jews in the city. This was certainly a harsh measure for some of them as well, but the rewards were great – they could choose among the finest and most centrally located dwellings in our city, completely furnished and fully stocked.

When we finally moved, Mother insisted on dragging a sack of coal and kindling along with her from our cellar. “There’s winter to think of,” she said. At first, the search for flats went slowly. Those who were practical and efficient, usually owners of the better apartments, were the first to find the nicer homes in the designated area and come to terms with their owners for the exchange. Others, like us, whose flats had little appeal or who could not take the initiative, tended to wait, relying on the promises that the exchange would take place in an orderly fashion. At any rate, the number of Lithuanians in our courtyard grew. Even longstanding Lithuanian neighbors, known to be decent people, couldn’t seem to help jumping at the chance to improve their living conditions. These people would at least meet us with a sheepish smile – “after all, the flat is abandoned anyway”. Others did not bother to conceal their scorn and hatred.

The days went by; we had no place to go, and our anxiety grew. Once or twice my parents went to scout the area of the planned ghetto, but wherever they went, the Lithuanians there said they had already exchanged their dwellings, and the Jews that had already moved claimed that all the places around them were taken. Only once did my parents manage to bring candidates for an exchange to our flat. With their noses in the air and contemptuous faces the Lithuanians looked around – fourth floor, damp in the walls – they had better prospects elsewhere.

The stream of wagons and wheelbarrows rolled towards the bridge, growing day by day. Peasants from all over the surrounding district hastened to the city with their wagons to profit from the transfer of the Jews.

Not all of those who were first to move gained by it. As a result of pressure and intervention by interested parties, the borders of the ghetto were changed, and certain parts of it were excluded after some of the deals were made. Once again, people had to go out searching, with all the places around spoken for and filled. Perhaps it was best to wait until the last minute after all; perhaps they would change the borders again, or even cancel the entire decree; besides, means of transporting belongings were scarce – what to take, what to leave behind?

Near us a small, dim flat in Rotushe Square housed the “Jewish Ethnographic Society”. My father was at home there, and I would often go with him. Ancient Torah Ark coverings with golden embroidery could be seen through the glass cabinet windows, bronze Hanukkah lamps, and silver ornaments for Torah scrolls. From the pictures on the walls, thick-bearded men pierced me with austere gazes. On Father’s initiative, a list of folk remedies for a variety of illnesses was also stored there, compiled by my grandfather Shalom Zvi, Mother’s late father. The adjoining flat was a Jewish orphanage. Once, at Hanukkah, after raffles and latkes, a cellist played a sad, sweet tune there that made a deep impression on me – it was “Hebrew Melodies” by the composer Yoseph Acharon,. I sometimes recollect these things bound together, the dark museum and the melancholy strains of the cello, and I do not know whether they found their way to the ghetto as well – the portraits of the rabbis, the Torah Ark coverings, and the silver ornaments.

And what became of the large Jewish library on the city’s main boulevard, where I had gone countless times with Father? I was a favorite of the elderly chief librarian there, whom I nicknamed Zeide Buch (Grandfather Book), and his two sons Onkl Buch (Uncle Book). The entire Yellin family’s life was centered around the large library, and the two sons were writers. The more fragile and delicate of the two, Chaim Yellin, was to become the fearless leader of the ghetto underground; the other, Meir, – closing the circle – shared recently a distinguished literary prize with my elderly father. The time allotted by the Germans to find an apartment was up, and we had nowhere to go and

no one to turn to. An unequivocal announcement made it clear that the date for moving would not be postponed, and any Jew found in the city limits beyond the set date would face dire consequences. Already there were almost no Jews to be found, and the ring of hostility grew tighter. My parents decided to wait no longer, gathered a few belongings, suffered not a few qualms with regard to some books, and we set out. The plan was to live temporarily in the flat of a teacher friend who had agreed to put us up until a place was found for us.

At the very last minute, before we had taken up our bundles, one of our last remaining Jewish neighbors came running in to take leave of us, forcing us to sit for a moment on our baggage. This was an old folk tradition for luck on the journey. During the coming years, I am sorry to say, I saw this furtive ceremony repeated scores of times. Each time it came to be performed more tearfully, more heart-wrenchingly, and the chances that the journey would go well became slimmer and slimmer.

Five days before the deadline, we left our apartment and set out.

Locked Gates

The 15th of August 1941 came, a mere eight weeks since the disturbances began, and the gates of the ghetto were locked. Everyone was now inside. For a few weeks, people continued to move from place to place in search of a corner for themselves. Occasionally new families were brought in, having survived by some miracle and been gathered from here or there. From a population of about 30,000 in the first days, only a few thousand remained at the end of three years.

Aggressive people took up the larger apartments and more spacious settings – after all, they had given up fine dwellings, and many possessions in the city. However, even those who had nothing at all to offer were sent here. Grabbing and insolence abounded, the strong prevailing over the weak. In the end, did any advantage accrue to the vulgar and pushy people over the more refined? Reality shook them up and jumbled them, pressed them together and ground them up, and in the long run the strong had no advantage over the weak, nor the aggressive over the meek. In the end it was hard to tell one kind of person

from another. To quote the movie *Shoah*, "From the gas cells, when the doors were opened, they fell out in one solid block."

Among those shut in against their will, were also those who for years had tried with all their might to get away, to cut themselves off, to live as non-Jews. Now it was all to no avail; they were forced to share our fate. There were *Yekkes*, German Jews, who appealed their case to see whether they, seventh-generation citizens of the *Heimat* (homeland), had to live in the ghetto with the *Ost-Juden*, the Eastern European Jews.

In the meantime my parents had to continue making the rounds in search of a place for us. Outrageous the hardness of heart among those who occupied more space than was allotted to them, some of them friends and acquaintances, who now became unapproachable strangers.

To me, everyone was a stranger. But I was told once by Dr. Gurevitch, Ettele's mother, "This was not a concentration camp or work camp where total strangers were forced together, free to turn tooth and claw against their neighbors. These were members of your own community, with whom you had lived for years; you knew them in different, more respectable circumstances, now suddenly showing a different side of themselves, often an ugly and repulsive one. This was one of the most hurtful things about the ghetto."

By chance, my father met Mottel's relatives. Mottel Podliash was a very simple, ordinary man. Years ago, while a student, Father had lived like a member of the family in Mottel's flat on Green Hill, which was barren and crammed with offsprings. Mottel's manner of speech, like his manner of living, was rough and vulgar, but also straightforward, warm and candid, vivid and full of good humor. He was the colorful model for a character in some of my father's stories. Now it was Mottel's daughter Beila who, upon hearing of our family's hardship, decreed laconically – come to us. By this time Mottel and Beila's husband were already gone – they had been among those taken to the Seventh Fort. The diminished family now included Hinda, Mottel's second wife; Beila; a younger brother; and a pair of young twins. An older brother had been drafted into the Red Army. They now lived in the easternmost part of the ghetto. After several trips back and forth with our belongings, we moved into their flat, which consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. They hung a sheet across the middle of the larger room and said, "Here's where you'll live."

Although the whereabouts of the father and husband were still unknown, it was not bitterness and grief that prevailed in the household, but a quiet optimism, a kind of Hassidic “faith” in Mottel’s characteristic spirit. Afterwards, Father never stopped praising them and telling how our salvation came, not from institutions, not from friends, but from Mottel’s family – simple, warm-hearted and unpretentious people.

We had scarcely put down our things before I began exploring. Everything was new to me, unfamiliar and intriguing. Most of the buildings in the ghetto were made of wood, similar to those we lived in at the resort. Beside them rose three or four apartment blocks – cheap four story quarters for laborers, built of concrete and left unfinished by the Soviets. The blocks’ silhouettes dominated the view, serving as a landmark and a signpost. In our part of the ghetto, the garden suburb, the houses were small, with one or two floors, and were surrounded by fields of green. Some of the previous householders had improved their property with ornamented wooden fences and flowerbeds, leaving them against their will to the Jews. Trees? I do not recall any trees in the ghetto. There were empty lots between the houses, roads that were unpaved, but wide and straight, laid out in parallel and perpendicular lines. At the intersections were places for public squares, some square in shape, some circular – evidence of the modern, west European planning that characterized the newer part of the city.

North of the ghetto the land was higher. A road cut diagonally across the slope rising gradually from left to right. To the south, the border of the ghetto hugged the riverbank, its dunes blocking our view of the water and the city on the opposite shore. Along the river, inside the ghetto, stretched a long, unpaved road; at its eastern length were rundown factories built of red bricks. An abandoned sawmill by the river marked the farthest southeast corner of our new pale of settlement.

When we first moved, the boundaries of the ghetto were still not clear. Small flags delineated here and there the line along which a fence was gradually stretched. To me the ghetto seemed a huge expanse, and the trip across it from end to end, a long and adventurous journey. Through the center of the area allotted to the ghetto passed a main road leading to the northeastern part of the country, a route that was important to the Germans. They fenced both

sides of this road, excluding it from the ghetto, and cutting it into two parts – the only connection between them was a high, arched bridge for pedestrians. The bulk of the ghetto, the “big ghetto,” lay to the south, spreading to the riverbank. North of the big ghetto, bordering the foothills, was the “little ghetto.” At its center was one of the open rounds that had doubtless been built to beautify the growing city.

The wooden bridge became the umbilical cord of the ghetto. It astonished me to see how it was possible to build such a high bridge with the aid of nothing but boards and planks. As soon as it opened, it teemed with people; there was never a moment without several people being on it. Some had business crossing it; others, like myself, came out of curiosity. From its dizzying height I gazed around me, as from a high tower. I was a little fearful about looking down on the road below, both because of the great height, and because of the German vehicles constantly passing below. Before long, the bridge was dismantled, there was no more little ghetto, and once again it was impossible, even in make-believe, to look down from on high at the Germans. Only the colorful painting by Esther Luria remains in our days to testify that the bridge is not just a figment of my imagination.

To the west was the Jewish shtetl. For generations our people had crowded here at the side of the main road leading into the big town, where, at the time, Jews were forbidden to reside. At the edge of this quarter, facing the city, stood the main gate of the ghetto. Muddy alleys, narrow and twisted; old houses with mossy roofs, leaning one against the other, clustered beside the synagogues and schools, as in Chagall's paintings. Among them, like a precious stone, was the famous Slobodka Yeshiva, a house of Torah known in all corners of the world. In one of the newer institutions of that quarter, the Tarbut (“Culture”) School, my father had taught for years. Long ago, before the war, my father wrote a story dealing with the “*Mussar*” movement, headed by Rabbi Israel Salanter, whose activity was focused within the Yeshiva. My eyes were caught by the motto my father put in the mouth of this austere spiritual leader: “The bridge [from the city] leads to Slobodka – not away from it.” He didn't know just how prophetic the statement was. Now, by order of the German Kommandant, the Lithuanian garden suburb and the Jewish shtetl

were welded together into a special strip of world and cut off from whatever was outside: a ghetto.

Separating the two parts, the old and the new, lay a Catholic cemetery. They excluded it from the territory of the ghetto, leaving only a narrow passage through Kriksciukaicio Street, a bottleneck or "corridor," as it was called, to link the two parts of the big ghetto. The route went between the cemetery on one side and the raised bank of the river on the other; and like the wooden bridge, it was constantly in use.

One day a light airplane landed in the cemetery, and several days later some very painful events took place in the ghetto. Since then we never failed to cast a suspicious glance at the Catholic cemetery whenever we passed it, lest some evil issue forth again.

At first my parents forbade me to leave the house. But gradually they relented, preoccupied by their own worries. These outings were a great relief for me after the two months of tension. I had never before appreciated the warmth and security to be had from living with one's own kind, Jews only.

Among those brought together here I found acquaintances from different times and places – friends from kindergarten, from school, from summer camp, and from the waiting room of Dr. Kamber, the pediatrician – a kind of grand reunion. We began to find out who remained, who was missing. Where was Joshua, who had brought me a bouquet of wild flowers on my birthday? And what happened to Tamara Rappaport, who spoke Hebrew with her parents, and whose very name seemed to emit the aroma of a far-off and magical land? If they had not been caught along the way, they may already be in the heart of the Soviet Union, or perhaps they had gotten as far as China. The enchanting fragrance of distant lands reached my nose. Ever since my good friends, the brothers Arke and Maimke, had returned from Helsinki the summer before with stories of stoplights that changed colors from moment to moment, I imagined that the entire outside world was adorned with marvelous signposts of this kind. Now, both the brothers and I were shut in the ghetto, at leisure to dream about the world outside and to imagine what was happening to our missing friends.

I was a boy from a "good home," and during the first period in the ghetto I suffered not a little for it. I couldn't bear the vulgarity, the violence, and the

profanity all around. I learned a new word, employed by my discomfited parents to deal with their new surroundings – *Unterwelt*, or “underworld.” In other words – we will never sink so low, we will not be counted among them. Once, in our first days in the ghetto, I joined Mother when she went to the butcher’s, where they doled out small rations of meat. The line was backed up and we waited a long time, anxious lest the supply run out before our turn came. Just as we came to the counter, a poker-faced woman jumped up from behind us and claimed it was her turn, and she got the last rations of meat. What could my mother say to this brazen woman; how should she respond? Frustrated and defeated, she hissed loudly through clenched teeth – “May a black spot stain your conscience forever!” Thus spoke my mother, the poet, to the woman with strong elbows, who made her way out of the butcher shop without batting an eyelash, her booty under her arm. I learned an important lesson that day about the way of the world.

Even two years later, I was apparently still astonishingly thin-skinned. One day, near the “corridor,” I met the mother of Mossik, my best friend of former times, and struck up a conversation. Since they had moved into the old part of the ghetto, and the father had disappeared, we saw very little of each other. I remembered them as being quiet and courteous, well-mannered people. With a great deal of embarrassment I now heard her, speaking bitterly, with a liberal sprinkling of curses and vulgarities. How low we have sunk, I later said to my mother, that even Mossik Zvik’s mother, a dentist, already spoke like a part of the *Unterwelt*. I never saw Mossik, his mother or his sister again.

In time the ghetto fence took on a clear and rigid identity of its own, and I came to know its course and every detail of its contours and configurations. It divided the world into two. As the days passed, my world became constricted into what was inside the barbed wire. Everything outside became a cipher that I gazed at through the fence, as if through a clear but impenetrable curtain.

In the first weeks in the ghetto, procedures were declared, routines were fixed. The self-governing body for the ghetto – the *Komitat* – appointed officials and aides, established offices, departments, and storehouses; and issued food tickets and work permits, all in accordance with the Germans’ instructions.

But the Germans never stopped their duplicity.

Already by dusk on the day the gates of the ghetto closed, scores of people who had been caught at random in the streets were executed. And though the Germans repeatedly insisted that such things would not happen in the ghetto, three days after the gates were closed another disaster occurred. Five hundred and thirty-four people with higher education, who answered a summons to volunteer for a special assignment" requiring broad knowledge", failed to return from their first day of work. All the appeals and attempts to investigate were fruitless. Family members of the missing persons, more than usually inquisitive by nature, worked without rest to gather information, but the Germans asserted firmly that their relatives had been sent on a special secret mission, and that before long they would be sending letters. A few weeks later, in fact, postcards began arriving, signed by some of the missing persons. We know now that this was part of a campaign of deception – all those who were taken were murdered at the Ninth Fort on the first day. Years later, an argument arose – some claimed that the Germans did not specify that the recruits be well educated, but rather that they be well dressed – *gut angezogen*, which the *Altestenrat* had interpreted as *gut erzogen*, or well raised. There are those among the descendants of the victims who have not forgiven the interpreters of the order to this day.

Work was required of everyone, and it fell to the ghetto authorities to enforce the rule. The *Komitat* had a Jewish police force whose members sported blue and white bands on their sleeves and who wore special caps. They affected military manners and gave orders in Lithuanian. Side by side with the Germans, they watched over all those coming and going at the gate.

If the fence was like a diaphragm, such that anything happening along it affected the breath of the ghetto, the gate was its very heart, the place through which the life of the ghetto came and went. Through the gate came search and confiscation patrols, squads for selection and arrest. Here supplies were brought in; food was smuggled – some say arms as well – and a lucky few were able to escape.

Passage through the gate occupied everyone. At dawn and at dusk the work brigades exited and re-entered. When they left, the people were counted closely; when they returned, they were not only counted, but were thoroughly searched as well, lest they smuggle in food or valuables that they might have

obtained by barter with Lithuanians. A dangerous game of cops and robbers developed, each side improving its stratagems to defeat the other. Smugglers might get off with confiscation of their goods, overnight arrest in the local jail, and a turn in the hard labor brigade the next day but, for no clear reason, they might also be taken to the dungeons of the Gestapo in the city, there to wait miserably with the other hostages who were regularly gathered there, until their fateful dispatch to the Ninth Fort. "Baim geto toyerl, brent a fayerl" (near the gate of the ghetto burns a flickering fire), sung to the well-known tune of "Oyfn pripetchok brent a fayerl" (in the tiny grate burns... etc.) was the first ghetto song, and it spread rapidly. With a great deal of humor and sarcasm it describes the process of inspecting work brigades as they passed through the gate.

The hardest of the work brigades was the airport brigade, the one destined for the Aerodrome. No one wanted to be enlisted in it, and everyone did their best to avoid it. After a five-kilometer march south across both rivers, workers had to perform various manual tasks, under harsh supervision and in any weather, on day or night shift, digging and quarrying, loading and carrying. The Germans were expanding the airport, the one whose bombing had ushered in the war that first morning. Every morning and evening a crisis broke out at the gate over filling the quota of workers for the brigade. The Germans announced that the ghetto existed solely by virtue of this brigade. Accordingly, every able-bodied man in the ghetto was assigned to join it in turn. The police force was enlisted to execute the order. Even after this, they failed at times to meet the quota, especially for the night shift which left for work at sunset. Then, for want of an alternative, the police would snatch workers from any day-shift brigade returning from work, sending them out for another shift of hard labor. The trials of the *aerodromtchik* also made their way into the earliest ghetto songs.

As a result of the hardships suffered by this brigade and others like it, the practice grew up of hiring an "angel," a strong young man who, for the right price, would take one's place for the hard work – another of the strange jobs in the ghetto and the slang that went with it.

My Universities

My universities, the first period in the ghetto, countless impressions.

Neighbors: Across from us lived a Parisian family, a mother and her daughter, thrown by chance into the ghetto. A foreign language, fragrances, manners, and dress from another world. The little girl was somewhat younger than I. She had long blonde ringlets tied with colored ribbons. Her dress was always spotless; she wore colorful stockings and shiny shoes. She seemed to have come straight out of a children's tale, perhaps *Sleeping Beauty*. The two spoke only French between themselves; the sound of their conversation was like pleasant music, distant and appealing. Their flirtatious manner reminded me of scenes Mother and I had seen not long ago in the opera. They did not seem to belong to the world that we were stuck in. The fairy-tale girl always held a doll or two; they too were combed and neatly dressed. The climactic moment for us, however, was the public appearance of her biggest doll, a life-sized toy that could make human noises and sing songs. Occasionally my sister would be allowed to hold this doll, or push one of the smaller dolls in a tiny but matching carriage, while all of us looked on admiringly. The inside of their apartment, too – rugs, embroidered napkins, colored jars, paintings and lace – seemed to us like the land of dreams. Like creatures from another world the French family spun around us, and I was intoxicated.

The gardens beside the houses: I first saw dwarf nasturtiums there, their angular flowers, their polygonal fruit, their sharp aroma. Many years later I encountered that smell once again, in my mother-in-law Yocheved's garden in the kibbutz, and for a moment I was stunned – do ghetto flowers bloom here, too?

There were vegetable patches among the houses, left behind by the Lithuanians. One day, as if by a prearranged signal, people suddenly appeared from all sides of the plot, tearing up and trampling the plants. At first I did not understand what all the commotion was about, all the feverish digging in the dirt around me, until I saw their baskets filling with potatoes. I ran straight home to tell of my discovery and find a basket so I could get a share of the spoils. To my surprise, when I came back, all was quiet – no one was there, and all that remained was the shorn and trampled field.

So I learned that day both how potatoes grew and about lightning raids that became the custom in the ghetto. The vegetable gardens were still perceived as belonging to the Lithuanians, and touching them was prohibited. But there are restrictions that people cannot abide. People kept watch upon one another, and as soon as one person crossed the barrier, in the blink of an eye the entire field was plundered and stripped. With the aid of family members, receptacles prepared in advance, and an efficient division of labor, the harvest was gathered and brought speedily to hiding places, all before the police could be summoned. They were even able, these aggressive plunderers, to rid themselves of children like myself, keeping them at a distance and preventing them from enjoying the least scraps from the feast. Their rake-over was so thorough that later, when the police had allowed access to the field once again, it was impossible to find, even after determined digging, more than a stray tuber or two.

In our house, my efforts to join the plunder were not accorded much glory. I was given to understand that our family did not indulge in certain kinds of lawlessness and looting, even if "everyone else was doing it." Order must be maintained, rules must be obeyed.

My hill: Behind our house, as in several other places within the ghetto, was a large pit, evidently the result of an excavation. In it grew wild plants and reeds. Here I found ants, beetles, and grasshoppers to play with, to pull their limbs off one by one, to build ghettos for. I would spend hours alone here in my private corner on a mound of dirt that was my ship and my airplane, and I its captain and pilot. Here no one fenced me in or set limits to my imagination.

Then there was the dog Belka. As her name suggests, she was all white, and beautiful. Perhaps her previous owners had abandoned her here, though she may have come from anywhere. Short-haired, small, agile, and friendly. For the first time in my life I had a dog, and I was beside myself with joy. She had two yellow spots on her left side, one on her body, another on her snout, which amused everyone who saw her – a truly Jewish dog she was, wearing our mark of disgrace as required. I spent entire days playing with her, digging her a den in the mound at the bottom of the pit, pretending that I was burrowing out a long tunnel that would take both of us far away.

But other times came, and Belka disappeared, as if sensing the changes about to take place. Perhaps she simply slipped through the barbed wire fence and found a quieter corner. At least we were not forced to deliver her to the authorities when the order came, some time later, to hand over all pets. And I was left for many years with a longing for a dog of my own.

The alley where we lived on the edge of the ghetto was convenient, relatively speaking. The fence blocked its end, leaving us a somewhat concealed corner. Consequently, it was possible to exchange goods through the fence with Lithuanians in the neighborhood. At the time, the sentries were not overly zealous, interpreting the injunction not to approach within two meters of the barbed wire with a certain laxity. Between the rounds of the sentries from one end of their beat to the other, it was possible to get things done.

I used to watch in bewilderment the hasty commerce being conducted over the fence. Across from us, just around the corner of a building, stood a Lithuanian woman, apparently aimlessly. My mother would wave her hand or flap a woolen skirt or a colorful towel up and down to arouse her interest. After a few vain efforts, the Gentile woman would stir and begin waving her own items of trade – eggs, butter, meat. Then the vocal part of the transaction would begin, while they haggled on the terms of exchange. When they agreed, both would look hastily left and right, spring simultaneously to the fence, trade the goods in their hands in an instant, and retreat to their starting corners. Sometimes the lengthy bargaining would end without result. Over time, Mother came to know some of the traders, and they recognized her. By peeping through the window, Mother could judge in advance whether it was worth her while to venture out that day or not. Occasionally, she would decide not to trade that day, only to discover that other women were getting a good deal, and immediately she would rush to join them. Other times, Mother would return to the house disappointed, like a fisherman who waits hours only to gather an empty net – no one had appeared on the other side. I never understood how Mother managed to ascertain, during these lightning exchanges, whether she was being cheated or deceived. The fact is she never complained of this happening. And thus, while our bundles grew smaller and our belongings became fewer, our table sometimes had better food than usual, depending on the day's trade. Mother, who had once dragged firewood

from the city to the ghetto, now changed her mind – there was nothing to save and no point in hoarding. What could be traded should be traded now, without delay.

In the midst of all this, there was an effort to establish a school for the children of the ghetto. My parents were pleased and so was I – it was time I returned to my studies. Under normal circumstances, I would have been entering the fourth grade. In the two-story building beside Democrats' Square near our house, they assembled children of varying ages and tried to divide them into classes according to similar levels of knowledge. We were brought together in groups for discussions; we may even have been taught some Torah. Sometimes we were all brought together in a larger hall on the ground floor, where a man wearing a skullcap would preach a long sermon. In my case, however, it was the public singing at the close of these sermons that took hold. Here I learned "Dudeleh" – "Lord, du, du, du (you, you, you) / where shall I find you / where shall I not find you", or "Ya Ribon Olam Ve-Olmaya" – "Lord of All the World," and others like them. Together with these a number of similar songs from my mother are stored in my memory, such as the vigorous protest of Rabbi Yitzhak ben Levi of Berdichev, who contends with the Holy One, Blessed be He, over the hardships He inflicts on His own people, the children of Israel for no sin of theirs. There would be days when these songs would become my priceless possessions, my only solace in times of distress.

* * *

Decrees and confiscation orders followed close upon one another: electrical appliances and radios, cameras and record players, jewelry, gold and silver utensils – even brass and copper tools had to be delivered to the Germans – samovars, candelsticks, cooking utensils – all were required for the war effort. In place of brass handles for doors and windows, we received replacements made of a gray alloy. I was impressed by the coordination involved in the exchange. Later, in winter, we had to give up first furs, then books – the latter a decree we couldn't bear.

On the heels of confiscation orders came the search parties. They moved from house to house through the entire ghetto., inspecting to ensure that the inhabitants had delivered up everything as commanded. Panic broke out – the Germans were coming! For many, and certainly for us children, this would be

our first direct encounter with them. Because we lived at the far end of the ghetto, we had to wait several days before the search party reached us. The inspections were very thorough, and we heard stories of insults and beatings, angry outbursts and humiliations. But in general the inspections passed peaceably enough. Some managed to move endangered items at night from an area that had not yet been combed to one where the searches had already ended.

One day, unexpectedly, a curfew was announced in our quarter. All were ordered to enter their flats, prepare identification papers, leave the doors to rooms and closets open, and put valuables on the table for inspection. Our turn had come.

Mottel's family consulted Mother about a few valuable items that they still had and had not given up before – would it get them into trouble? Mother suggested, “put the items in an out-of-the-way place, without actually hiding them. If the searchers see them, they can take them, and will have no complaint against you.” We ourselves had nothing to fear except for a package of good leather for boot soles that Mother had received by trade through the fence; now she wondered what to do with it.

They came suddenly and stormed in – a few German officers accompanied by Jewish policemen who ran before them like the Puss in Boots, shouting “*Achtung!*” as they came –

AchtungAchtungAchtungAchtungAchtungAchtungAchtungAchtung

A pair of syllables – one word, ostensibly ordinary, and yet even today it can freeze the blood in my veins.

Shining boots, dark uniforms, diagonal leather chest straps; belts on which heavy, well-oiled pistols were hung, ready to open fire in an instant. Black or brown lapels, gleaming visors, decorations and buttons, swastikas on their shoulders, solid leather riding whips or flexible canes in leather-gloved hands, batons held with elegant carelessness beneath their arms – for the first time the Germans stood in my house.

Loud voices commanded us to show our papers and identify ourselves one by one, me obscuring myself as best I could, not daring to raise my eyes. They turned this way and that, combing the surroundings with hungry hawk eyes.

While one of them began rummaging through cupboards, another one fixed his eyes on Beila and announced that he wanted to do a body search on her. With a sort of knightly gesture he motioned her behind the curtain. Our attentive ears heard muffled voices and embarrassed giggles. Later, she said that when he ordered her to undress, she explained to him why she had a bulge in her middle, which had first aroused his suspicion. Never mind, he told her, I'm a doctor. So I found out that Beila was well along in her pregnancy. While the one officer searched Beila, the other was casting about for some place else to search. On the spur of the moment, Mother made a quick decision – she went to the shelf near the ceiling and took down the partly hidden package of leather, extending it with a few words in good German. Satisfaction spread across the face of the officer, and, together with the other, who had finished with Beila, they turned and left the apartment without disturbing us further.

After this incident I asked my mother, if she had planned her actions. She said she didn't know how she would behave in advance – she had gambled intuitively. In the coming years I learned a lot about Mother's daring in taking risks and gambling: were it not so, I would not be here to write these words.

The officers left and we were relieved. If these were the Germans, perhaps things weren't so terrible. Perhaps they had grown tired of the searches, or perhaps their trained eye told them that there was no point in further searches in our house. And perhaps the package Mother had surrendered did the trick. That evening my mother and father had an argument – might the Germans not have left on their own, without the sacrifice of a valuable possession?

I went out to see what had happened in other houses. Around us I discovered buildings torn apart like feather pillows – doors unhinged, tiles uprooted, belongings thrown about. Not every flat was as lucky as ours. In our neighborhood stood a small locked octagonal shack, a riddle for us children. It now stood open, all its secrets revealed, like the guts of a butchered animal, with children swarming about. Hundreds, even thousands of meters of celluloid film lay in heaps and tangles, spilling out of the abandoned building's doorway. This had apparently been the workshop of a film producer or editor, destroyed by the Germans after they had confiscated any valuable equipment. Never before had I encountered such a vivid illustration of

manmade chaos, executed there in wild ribbons of film. In the days to come, there was soon nothing novel about it.

The next morning in the ghetto I spied a small package hidden in the bushes of the large pit in back of the house. With the enthusiasm of a hunter I ran to the police to inform them of my discovery. They came with alacrity, carrying with them a long pole with a hook like that of firefighters, of the kind I used to see in summer camp to extricate a bucket that had fallen down a well. Amidst a large crowd of spectators the police hauled a tin conserves box out of the brush; inside it were many folded banknotes. I was very proud of my alertness, and even the police praised me for this. So I was hard put to understand the scornful looks I received from some of those who were watching – someone had evidently hidden his money here until the storm would pass, using the same method of half-concealment as my mother, and along had come this naive and sharp-eyed boy to spoil the gamble.

Autumn

Strange Days

Until then things, in my private world, had been a kind of immense game of make-believe which all the participants – Jews, Lithuanians, and Germans – joined in together. Soon, I imagined, every one of us would return home and life would resume its normal course. But the facts were different. True, the inspections and confiscations had ceased, work brigades left in an orderly fashion, we continued to go to school, and the Komitat offices kept on working at full steam. But from time to time, for one reason or another, people would be taken to the Ninth Fort. The most trivial transgressions, such as failing to wear the yellow star, attempting to send mail, or not lowering the head as required, led to imprisonment or execution. The principal of a school was shot through the window of his room one night, even though it had been blacked out as ordered. Day succeeded day with new anxieties and scares: the head of the Altestenrat, Dr. Elkes, was suddenly summoned by the ghetto Kommandant; they were digging deep pits at the edge of the city; and on and on, rumors without end.

The High Holidays and Days of Awe – how strange to single out certain days with such a name – approached. They began issuing, in limited quantities, special family permits certifying that the possessor was employed in work that was vital to the German war effort. Those who were left out worried – what would become of them? People began striving for these “good” permits. Ironically, the permits required the stamp of a ghetto commander, a man named Jordan, and they consequently came to be known as “Jordan Passes” – our Jordan River, the one in the Jabotinsky Atlas that Arke, Maimke, and I used so often to study.

Once they stopped Father on the wooden bridge and nearly took him away. He managed to get out of that one, but as a result he took the trouble to obtain a “Jordan Schein,” too. For a minute I was allowed to hold the two white, narrow certificates, one in his name, the other for members of his family – seemingly innocent strips of paper, but what power they held, almost magical properties.

One morning the little ghetto was closed, a curfew was announced, and all the residents were assembled in the square. The sorting began – those with certain work permits were released and sent to the big ghetto, while others– hundreds of them– were loaded into trucks and taken in the direction of the Ninth Fort. All the rest, including the sick and the elderly, were left standing for several hours in the central square, surrounded by guards. Germans lay behind machine guns, their fingers on the trigger. A machine gun was even stationed on the wooden bridge. At the same time there was a house to house search to find anyone hiding. New orders were issued, and additional Germans took up firing positions all around. All the rifle barrels were now trained on the people in the square. Something decidedly inexplicable was about to happen here at any moment.

Then suddenly – so we were told – just as in a play, a motorcycle came roaring in, its rider waving a sheaf of paper from a distance and shouting: **Halt! Stop!** The commander of the operation took the document from the messenger's hand, scanned it briefly and ordered – Everyone disperse!

Those who were taken to the Fort also returned before long , unharmed.

Some viewed this as a miracle from heaven, divine intervention at the last moment. Skeptics claimed defiantly that the entire event was intentionally staged to frighten the Jews into reporting more diligently for work. After all, was it reasonable to suppose the Germans would fire machine guns into a defenseless crowd of men, women, and children who had never done them any harm? And so openly, too, in a public square of the city, right beside the country's principal road? Henceforth, the events of that strange day were known as the "Fake Aktion."

A mere three weeks later the little ghetto was surrounded once more. Once again all the ghetto dwellers were ousted from their homes, and once again the meticulous sorting began. While everyone was standing there, a column of smoke began rising from the hospital, which was in that part of the ghetto. The Germans had set fire to it with its patients, doctors, and nurses still inside – none were allowed to escape. Those who were seen jumping through the flames were shot. The cries and screams of people burning alive fell on those standing in the adjoining square.

Afterward, the Germans tried to claim that the hospital had been a hotbed of contagious diseases that endangered the entire city and their army. The possibility that the ghetto was the source of plagues, especially typhus, was used for years by the Germans as a kind of bogeyman to express their loathing and revulsion toward the ghetto and its inhabitants. More than once it prevented them from entering the ghetto, as if the overcrowded ghetto were not of their own making.

Holders of the "Jordan Schein" were sent to the big ghetto this time too, but about two thousand people without permits were taken to the Ninth Fort, never to return. Among them were all the residents of the home for the elderly and the ghetto orphanage – institutions located, as it happened, in the little ghetto. At this time, a decree was published ordering the complete evacuation of the little ghetto. The survivors were forced to find new quarters immediately, without their belongings. This time fortune went against those who had occupied the nicer villas on the hillside.

A mystery: the little ghetto, its evacuation now complete, remained empty and fenced off, rather than being returned to the Lithuanians. Some nights, voices could be heard there, and flashlights pierced the darkness, but by the next morning all would be quiet within.

We soon discovered that the Germans used the little ghetto as an overnight way station for transports of Jews from central Europe. They would let them off with only a few possessions, from the train that had brought them from Vienna on their way to points east for resettlement: their heavier baggage would catch up with them later, they were promised. The next morning the travelers would be taken straight to the Ninth Fort. Workers from our ghetto were sent to the train station and to the little ghetto to collect the belongings they left behind. Were it not for the tags attached to the elegant leather suitcases, listing the names of their owners in a calm and assured hand, our people would never have known who the overnight guests in the little ghetto were.

During the next few days the sentries grew more diligent, and the shots at night along the fence, and at any spark of light, grew more frequent. I remember a trivial event that occurred during those days: the airplane that landed in the Catholic graveyard beside the fence. We attached no special

importance to it at the time. Before it landed, several military vehicles had already assembled there. A high-ranking officer descended from the plane, judging from the energetic arm raising, brisk salutes, and snapping to attention by his greeters. We children lined the fence and looked on from a distance with undisguised curiosity.

End of October

Tuesday

One Monday about two weeks after the holidays, announcements appeared on the walls ordering all the ghetto inhabitants to report the next morning not to work, as usual, but to a general head count in the nearby Democrats' Square. The order allowed of no exceptions, even for the elderly and infirm. Homes were to be left open. The notice ended in the familiar brutal manner: anyone found at home after 6 a.m. – would be shot.

The bustle began in the predawn darkness. Lights came on, doors slammed, voices scolded at children. Some made hot drinks or swallowed a hasty bite, as families began streaming in a quiet, orderly manner toward the square. Not a soul knew how long the count would last; the more practical brought along sandwiches and bottles of hot water.

In the early half-light, it was impossible to estimate the number of people gathered here. In the greyness of the autumnal dawn I gradually began to perceive the square and its surroundings, packed with people, as I had never seen it before. Among them were respectable and prominent people, some of them world famous. All stood here together – a crowd numbering nearly thirty thousand. We soon met friends and stood together with them. The day drew on and everyone waited.

Little by little we could feel a certain movement in the mass of people, shifting toward the southern edge of the square, the side closest to the river. It was understood that an inspection of some sort was taking place way off at the edge of the crowd, though with extreme sluggishness or over-thoroughness, and we could do nothing but wait. In the meantime, we had noticed that many German guards were surrounding the square, so there was no point in thinking about slipping away early back to our homes.

So we stood where we stood. Because the day was cold, without sunshine, people moved about a bit, shaking arms and legs, running in place, and talking with one another. Father, as was his custom, made rounds in search of friends and acquaintances – such an opportunity, all the Jews of this great city together in a single place. He often exchanged witticisms with friends laced with his usual dark humor. However, for all his circulation in the vast sea of people, he was none the wiser as to precisely what was going on.

The day dragged on and slowly two or three broad lines of people formed, moving southwards at slightly different speeds. The question arose – which line to join? Should we try to hasten the inspection, or should we hang back? On the one hand, it might be best to get it over with; on the other, perhaps in the course of the day the Germans would tire of the entire effort and dismiss the last of us without checking us at all. Which was the better option, no one could say.

At any rate, it was now noon. Movement in the lines was now more apparent; we were clearly headed toward a certain spot. We could distinguish both more Jewish policemen and more German guards. There the lines of those waiting were defined and delimited. Where those who had passed the search had gone wasn't clear. At any rate, the dwellings and streets close by the square seemed from here to remain deserted and empty.

According to the rumors filtering back to us from the front of the lines, the Germans were examining each family separately. Immediately people began rehearsing, to themselves and to their families what to say and how to answer when questioned. It was generally agreed that we should make the best impression possible – that we should appear healthy, youthful, skilled, and motivated to work, for the Germans had always insisted that the purpose of the ghetto was to aid their war effort. Large families split into two or more units, and older family members managed to pair themselves up with younger ones.

By degrees, we came closer and closer to the front of the arena, until we were standing in lines of about eight people each. The rest of the square beyond the barrier was empty, hemmed in mainly by Jewish policemen who were helping to keep order. A little way from them, standing apart, was a group of German guards. These were shabby Wehrmacht soldiers from the local

garrison, rifle and belt dragging, wearing crumpled caps on their heads and sagging gaiters on their boots. Normally, they guarded the ghetto fences and served as escorts for the work brigades. A wretched bunch, most of them getting on in years or in poor health, their mission was to guard the Jews instead of fighting on the Eastern Front. Now they were straggling back to accompany groups from the inspection grounds in some unspecified direction. In the center of the square, at a distance from all the others, the dreaded SS men were stationed. They were the focal point of the activity. Spit-polished, in black uniforms with heavy pistols in their holsters, they were dictating which direction to send everyone who passed them. Even though we could see groups being sent from here to there, we could not deduce any particular pattern, either from the direction they were marched in or from the composition of the groups.

Some way beyond us, toward the river, was a large open lot, a kind of shallow bowl like the one we had in our yard. To the left, on some sand mounds overlooking the river, stood a few shacks that belonged to the abandoned sawmill at the edge of the ghetto. Looking closely, I could see a large number of people there, apparently ours. Why they were being held there, none of us knew.

Scene: A Jewish policeman holding two children approaches one of the German officers. He halts several paces from them, stands at attention like a well-drilled soldier, and with lowered head makes a request. The patent gestures of subservience apparently have their desired effect; with a slight nod, the German officer assents. The policeman turns aside and, still holding the children and breaking into a slow but stylized trot, begins crossing the open square, across the shallow pit by the river, straight to the people among the shacks on the mounds. After a few minutes, the policeman returns by the same route, still trotting, but this time alone. A whisper races through the crowd. Unclear as the patterns of sorting have been, it is now obvious that the sawmill is the preferred destination. "They get everything, the German slaves", say the people, grinding their teeth. *End of Scene.*

The patience of the Germans was apparently wearing thin, for they began moving ever-larger clusters of people past them. The suspense grew. We found ourselves suddenly being headed off by policemen. They cut us off

from the mass behind, surrounded us, and began moving us forward as a separate group, apparently in preparation for sorting. Father, having fallen a bit behind at that moment – probably wrapped up in conversation with someone – was suddenly on the other side of the chain of policemen now cutting between us and those behind, unable to rejoin us. Mother did not lose her wits for even a moment and cried out. The policemen tried to calm her, He will join you later; don't worry; he will be right behind you. But Mother would have none of it – he's the head of the family, without him we won't budge. While this was happening, the mass of people around us was shoving and pressing slowly forward. "I don't know where I found the strength all of a sudden," she said later. With my sister on her arm and me holding on behind her with all my might, Mother heaved us all backwards, broke through the chain of policemen, seized Father, who, confounded, had frozen in his tracks, and pulled him with all her strength to join us. So forceful was her tug, that the nearest policeman made no effort to stop her.

Still agitated by our near separation from Father, we did not notice that we were now part of a group slowly passing by the Germans. **Achtung!** The lines stopped dead. Only to breathe deep into the stomach, bite lips, and hold tightly to the parents and to one another. Rows were counted, a momentary pause, then the order to keep moving. In front was a Jewish policeman, at the sides and behind us a German sentry or two, and in between was our group, consisting of fifteen or twenty rows, with six to eight people in each. And already we heard voices among us – *oy, Yidn*, we're going left, that isn't good. But others cried out – no, they said go right. Yet another voice, perhaps that of the Jewish policeman marching beside us, his face betraying no emotion but with a friendly look in his eyes – *Yidn*, he whispered, it's all right, all will be well.

Within a few moments we were being marched along the east side of the square. I held Mother's hand tightly; beside her, Father held my four-year-old little sister in his arms. From my place at the edge of the group, I had a good view of what was happening all around us.

The crowd remaining in the square watched us through the chains of guards, trying to guess which way we were headed. For a moment it seemed to me as if we were walking on a raised stage, as in a theatre, with the audience

watching our movements. I felt bashful, and tried to march well, with a show of restraint and self-discipline. We continued marching along the edge of the square, further and further to the north. My heart sank. At a certain moment the lead policeman slowly began to turn the group in a deep semi-circle, like a boat in mid-river, and by degrees we found ourselves facing back to the right, in the direction of the sand mounds, the sawmill, and the shacks. A sigh of relief broke out among us – thank God, we are in the good direction.

We were just finishing the large U-turn when the next group swept past us. They too were first marched north, in the same direction we had gone, but with this difference – they were accompanied only by German guards, not Jewish ones. Something made me watch their faces intently. For a moment, my gaze focused on a young woman marching on the edge of the row. Her face had a certain concentrated expression which became engraved in my memory, as if she were already in a strange and different place, far from us.

So near did we pass to them, that we could hear talking among them, voices murmuring for something. Maybe their calls were directed at us. At times I still seem to hear the voices. They passed close by us, and little did I know that I was confronting at close range a group of people being led by blind chance to a fate completely different from our own.

They receded farther and farther from us. And we, after another short march, arrived at the mounds of sand beside the river. Crowds of people were waiting on the docks, waving and cheering. Our family arrived at the shore in one piece and joined the thousands who had been waiting there since morning.

All were excited and relieved. Thank God it was all behind us. Everyone exchanged stories, telling their fears and worries, describing how it had been for them. The question weighing on all our minds at the moment was what would happen to those still waiting to be sorted, and what was the fate of those sent in the other direction. Rumor had it they were being taken to the little ghetto. We heard stories of people who refused to be separated from their family – the elderly, the lame, the infirm. In most cases, the sorters had granted their requests and sent them together – to the left. In other cases, we were told of family members coldly and brutally torn from one another, with no compunction whatsoever.

Large in all the stories of sorting figured the same SS officer who had waved his hand *links-rechts, links-rechts*, it was he who decided the fate of everyone who came before him. Even after he grew tired, he took a seat and continued his work, not stopping the whole of that day. Today I know that his name was Rauke, and that he also directed the Aktion against the 500 members of the intelligentsia.

We didn't have to wait much longer that day. The Germans were evidently tired of the whole affair and during the last hour they began channeling people in the two directions simultaneously, *links-rechts, links-rechts*, in larger and larger groups each time.

We were still excitedly exchanging stories when a German officer emerged, jumped upon a table or chair set out for him, shouted ***Achtung!*** and began speaking. His words were brief, to the point, and not arrogant. I did not understand all he said, but the upshot was that all the people assembled there were to remain in the ghetto. His last words, however, I remember clearly: "As long as people work – all will be well. If not – kaput." *Achtung, halt, kaput* – the entire story of the ghetto in three short words. After a day of suspense and anxiety, a rumble of assent arose from the tired but attentive crowd, almost a cheer. The German descended from his stand, and the crowd began dispersing to their homes.

We too went home. It was twilight. The cold evening air descended upon us all. Hungry and tired, we tumbled inside, to find that no one had touched the things in our open flats during the day. While Mother prepared food, the neighbors gradually began returning to their own dwellings. Mottel's family was late in coming, as were the French woman next door and her golden-haired daughter. Yet Mottel's people were all hard working. All night we left the doors open, in case they had been delayed. Or perhaps they would be freed to return later. People trickled in from the neighboring flats, asking whether we had seen this person or that, and we began to realize how many of us had yet to return home. Friends and relatives began conspiring in groups how they might steal, under cover of night, into the little ghetto, smuggling blankets and food to their loved ones; for all those people had left that morning with nothing, and the night was so cold.



That evening, or perhaps the next morning, Father, hidden behind the partition, suddenly asked me whether I could recall exactly the closing remarks of the German officer. "If not," I quoted, "*alles wird kaput sein.*"

Father was pleased. I felt as if I had given him important information. I asked no more questions, but I knew that Father, the historian, was secretly writing historical notes of some kind – the chronicles of the Jews in the ghetto.

Like a drunkard I staggered to bed, without even undressing. Not even the sounds of gunfire along the fences, more of them than usual, especially from the direction of the little ghetto, kept me from sleeping like a stone that night.

Wednesday

Mottel's family had not returned by next morning. And I, after eating something, returned to the square. Until yesterday, it had been nothing to me, only a huge lot, an empty space of no consequence beside the houses in the ghetto. I doubt I even knew, at the time, its pretentious name – "Democrats' Square." To the west the buildings multiplied and that was where most of the ghetto was, while to the east the garden suburb houses merged gradually into the quiet countryside. Now the square was empty except for stray Komitāt workers picking through the piles of possessions and refuse left behind. Whatever they collected, they piled along the road that cut across the square, which was also the road to our house.

While walking and looking about, my eye fell on some strangely shaped lumps among the mounds of rubbish. I passed the lumps several times from a distance until I had mustered the courage to get closer. From afar, they looked like sacks stuffed full of old clothes. I was torn between an instinctive aversion and a fascinated attraction toward the fearsome mystery laid before me – these were human corpses. I had never seen corpses so close up, of people without the breath of life. I could have even touched them had I wished, there was no one there to prevent me. They lay there all tangled and crowded, each person sunk in on himself as if in deep thought, elderly people taking a lazy afternoon nap. Their faces were as white as that of the milkmaid who fainted at summer camp; their eyes were closed. Nothing moved. So this is how the dead look. Was this a glimpse of death's arrival, so calm, so relaxing? I felt that this was an important question for those days.

And why were they here of all places, along the wayside? I suppose they had been sick or very old people who, with their last bit of strength or the help of their family, came out for roll call at dawn the day before, and, having reached this place, here they stayed. Their end may have been brought on by the long wait in line with no food or hot drink, or perhaps the evening chill had done them in. Perhaps no one had come to take them back home, so they had stayed in place until they froze to death. The cunning of the old! They alone had the power to elude the sorting.

It was several days until the last of them was cleared away.

While I stared at them, wondering, afraid, curious, standing still or passing uncomfortably by them, distant sounds of shots came to my ears. I looked up, seeking the source of the gunfire, which was erratic and discontinuous. The sounds were far away, so it took several seconds for me to discover their point of origin – somewhere along the road that started beyond the roofs of the little ghetto. Now I could make out large numbers of people, slowly climbing the hillside in small clusters, each group separated from the others, and surrounded by many guards.

Because of the great distance between this scene and me, it seemed to be taking place in silence. It surprised me to realize that this road, which was visible to all as it rose diagonally from left to right, was already mostly full of people. Had I not looked up to find the source of the gunfire, their march would have been completed unheard and undetected. Who were they, and where were they headed?

And then, only then, did the data from my sight and hearing come together in my mind, exploding into a conclusion as astounding as lightning, impossible to accept, unbearable to comprehend: here, in front of our eyes, they were leading our own people, those who had been separated from us last night, taking them in an undeniable direction – to the Ninth Fort.

The meaning of these things, revealed to me so suddenly while I stood beside the frozen corpses of the elderly, was so terrifying, so shocking, that I could not stand it, child that I was, for another instant. I abandoned the dead old ones and ran for dear life, back home, to Mother.

I suppose that at that point in time my childhood ended – its innocence, the privilege of being unafraid. From that moment on my understanding of human existence was changed, became different, more melancholy and sober.

A kind of mute cry seemed to enfold the whole ghetto. People stood still in the streets, in doorways and windows. All eyes were glued to the rising column of people in the distance. A quiet moaning broke out everywhere, growing louder and louder. It was a grieving and mourning for children, parents, friends, and relatives – a lament for themselves. Petrified, in disbelief, they saw how their kin were sent to their end, before their very eyes, nor could they raise a hand to save them.

Even at this distance we could see the movement of the groups, which were slow, wavering, and unwilling to go forward. Within the lines we could make out, even from afar, eddies of uncertainty, swaying, wavelike attempts, in vain, to stray to the left or the right. Any way but forward, any way but straight ahead, although the determined guards ran back and forth, raising their rifles and shoving, beating, and firing. Just so as unwilling herds of cattle are prodded to the slaughterhouse; and it was impossible to go any direction except forward.

What did they feel during those moments? For they too, like us, understood where they were headed, and what lay at the end of the road. They had stepped out yesterday at dawn for nothing more than roll call, leaving doors open and cooking stoves lit to warm the next meal. Innocently they had left their homes for a few hours, and suddenly it had become their last hour.

The lines of people continued to climb higher and higher. Where were so many people coming from, so many groups? Sometimes another hour went by before a new group ascended the path, then yet another.

They walked solemnly and meekly as if to a funeral – their own. And we, below them, across from them, stood choking with tears and frozen with horror. Silently, we followed them with our gaze. On no other occasion, before or since, have I witnessed a mass funeral as large, a funeral of escorts and escorted alike.

There were no more questions, no more doubts. It was suddenly all very clear – the long sorting process of the day before; the little ghetto that had stood empty for several weeks; the detention of people there for a cold night without

covers and food, and now, this morning, the march to the place of their destined destruction. And all in plain view, in full daylight, with all those who remained in the ghetto, and with them tens of thousands of people from the city and the surroundings, looking on, seeing how the Jews were sent to death.

So the Germans were really killing Jews. All those pretenses, those tendentious explanations and reassurances, all a monumental lie.

And suddenly, with a jolt, I grasped the fateful significance of the arbitrary *links-rechts* wave of that one-man judiciary. Yesterday, the same could have happened to our family too. The random blink of an eye separated me, standing here in the empty square this morning, gazing about in shock, from those being led up the hill. And my father may have been saved that day from a certain death, thanks to Mother's quick action.

And the group of people who had passed by us going to the north whose breath we could all but feel – strangers though they were to me – I little realized then that I would have such a large part in their remembrance, if only for the few minutes of their last steps. I felt almost as if I had returned from amongst them.

In the afternoon the last of the groups set out, and the hillside path sank back into its former state of anonymity. The transport had ended and not a soul remained in the little ghetto.

* * *

Evening arrived. The noise of the city subsided. We were still confused, and our measure was not yet full. Muffled, unfamiliar sounds reached us from a distance. Like summer webs carried by the wind, half-heard, half-stifled, there drifted down to us from the hillside the intermittent sounds of gunfire. Not in sporadic, isolated shots, but in continual volleys of machine-guns, in long and angry bursts. The heart refused to credit the ears: man, at this very moment, your brothers and sisters are being executed. You hear the sounds, but there is nothing you can do, nothing. You may cry out, or go mad. Nothing will help. The gunfire kept coming, with short intermissions, for several days. There were those who insisted that the shots were surely military exercises, merely maneuvers, maybe even the Russians had returned, having parachuted behind the German lines. But several days later, the Lithuanians on the other

side of the fence, with undisguised pleasure, filled in with color and detail that which we tried with all our might not to admit – everyone had been killed there.

Since then, I have only to see a drawing or painting with a diagonal line rising from left to right in the background, and I am transported there again as if by a magic wand. And so it is with music as well: Mahler's first symphony, for instance, the second and third movements: first a slow funeral march, accompanied by deep rhythmic drumbeats against a background of a meandering Jewish tune – and I cringe, accompanying the marchers' slow progress up the hill. Then suddenly, after a brief silence, a paralyzing scream bursts out from dozens of instruments, and I choke in tears, hold my head in desperation and cannot be consoled. I am there.

The Following Days

During the next few days some of the survivors of the mass executions began returning. By some miracle, they were able to crawl wounded from the pits, from between the layers of massacred bodies, and in the darkness of night return stealthily to the ghetto. They were able to tell of the last hours of those who had been taken there, but the members of the Komit t hid them well and swore them to secrecy, lest evil befall us all. However, their testimony sifted down to us all in spite of the secrecy and was not forgotten. So much so, that five years later, across oceans of time and space, when I wanted to impress my newfound friends, Sabras (native Israelis) in a public school in Tel Aviv, and to arouse their interest in me, a new immigrant boy only two weeks in the country, I found no other topic so likely to make them listen and draw their attention to myself – we were waiting in line for a special performance at the Eden movie theater in Tel Aviv – than to describe, among other things, how I had rescued myself by crawling out of the pits of the dead. My embarrassment knew no bounds when, a few weeks later, I found my story published in a children's magazine, in a heart-felt sketch written by one of my attentive listeners.

I now know also that, just as they helped execute the shtetl Jews, here also, at the Ninth Fort, the Lithuanians were active participants, a company of locals acting hand-in-hand with a company of Germans. Half the soldiers from

each company stood ready to fire, while the other half brought the people from the citadel's yard to one of four large excavations (fifty meters long, two meters wide, a meter deep) prepared by Russian prisoners of war a few days before. Water stood in the pits; the first to be killed (in groups of 100) were beaten with iron bars and rifle butts in order to force them to stretch out naked at the bottom of the trenches.

Then there was my cousin Rachel. Wavy hair, long eyelashes modestly covering blue and dreamy eyes, a young girl's fine-featured, slightly bashful face. She was seventeen when she came to us, and I fell in love with her immediately. She too was in the square that day. A few weeks before the war broke out, she had reached us from the townlet of Mazheik in the north. It had long been my mother's custom to encourage her relatives to get out of the shtetl and acquire a profession in the big city. Ten years before this, Mother had helped her younger sister Chaviva to receive training as a nurse before becoming a pioneer on a kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley. And although she was no Zionist, Mother also supported my Uncle Idel when he took his family to Palestine. But how frustrating that attempt was – even though they had a baby born in Tel Aviv, it did not keep them from packing up their tinsmith equipment before a year was out and returning to Siad, the shtetl where my mother was born. It is too hot there in Eretz-Israel, he claimed. And in his shtetl he was swallowed up by the first waves of war. Mother got her sister Feigeh's consent to send her eldest child Rachel to us for studies. She brought from her shtetl not only her charm, but also delicious smoked meats from the butcher shop that her parents owned. She lived with us a few weeks until she enrolled in a course for nurses, and a few weeks later she accompanied us to the ghetto.

There, however, with the problems of space that we had, we found no place for her except with Sarah, Mother's cousin, who came from the same shtetl.

On the morning of the big Aktion, Sarah asked Rachel to stay with neighbors, an elderly couple, during the sorting, so as to help them pass inspection. Rachel stayed with them when they were sent to the left.

Mother tore her hair with sorrow; she refused to be comforted. Her cousin Sarah knew no bounds. She couldn't forgive her for the death of the little lamb. A deadly hatred grew between them.

last days of the ghetto, Mother did not exchange a single word with her. The gulf was so great between them, so terrible the ban, that even I, many years later, could not have anything to do with Sarah, the only surviving member of my mother's family.

Intermediate Epilogue: Years Later

I spent the summer of 1977 in Washington, D.C. One Sunday I decided to look at the White House and join the bustle at a time when visitors from all over the nation were thronging there to meet the president of their country.

In an improvised arena on the south lawn stood a noisy, celebrating crowd of people, waiting. Orchestras played, flags waved in the breeze, choirs sang. Every so often, according to raised signs, a new group from among those gathered would wend its way towards the entrance of the building. At the same time, the group just emerging from its tour would pass beside them before dispersing. As one group goes in, the other comes out. They move quietly, without raising their voices. The light is soft; the grass quiet; the square is large. Suddenly something was very familiar to me, very close. Surprised, I found I was choking anew, after so many years, at the scene of the big Aktion in Democrats' Square. Shocked and upset, I left the place immediately, in a turmoil.

And again – November 1995. I set out early in predawn darkness, and from all the alleys around more people emerge, joining a silent walk in the same direction. The sky clears in the east, the warm clothes that I put on grow heavy. A queue of people form long before our destination. The crowd keeps order; no one pushes or shoves.

All night long people have been streaming to this place from all over the land, and even now, at dawn, the line is not short. The light is gray and the many waiting people, eight or ten abreast, move forward slowly, too slowly. Coming the other way are those who have already been there; they too are silent, their faces grave. These are the tens of thousands who have come to say farewell to the Prime Minister, who was assassinated the night before. As for me, as soon as I began waiting in the silent crowd, a feeling of suffocation fell upon me, of deep oppression, that grew as I moved forward in line. As if 54 years

and one week had not gone by since the big Aktion. I turned around and went home.

Later, I mentioned in passing what had happened to me in Washington to Danke, my friend since kindergarten. We were in the ghetto together, too, and he, a phoenix, even survived Auschwitz. Danke in turn told my story to his brother Urke, who was older than us and, accordingly, had been given in the ghetto the enviable job of *Eilbote*, errand boy for the Komit t, sporting a special ribbon on his sleeve. Urke told him he had had a similar experience. While on tour in Greenland, they reached a remote spot and watched a flock of penguins crowding together on an ice floe. Urke was suddenly struck by the thought, a reflection that astounded him – “just like in the big Aktion.”

So, for all of us, Democrats' Square is still implanted deep within. Sometimes it seems as if a part of me is still unsure that I was saved, as if it is ready for the bubble of time allotted to me to burst.

In May 1967, I thought my time was indeed up. The streets on my way to the university that morning were emptier than usual, and I was pedaling my bike to the research laboratory with particular heaviness. My hands shook as I prepared the experiments planned for that day, thinking how foolish it was to occupy myself on such a day with the development processes of the color of orange peels. Earlier that morning the radio had announced that the Egyptian ruler had closed the Straits of Tiran, blocking access to Israel's southernmost port. I did my best to make sure that my lab notes would at least be clear and legible. It was apparent to me there would be war. That night, I heard the footsteps of the telegraph messenger at two in the morning on the damp lawn outside our open window even before he rang the doorbell. I leapt up, my heart skipping several beats. Within a quarter of an hour – I still remembered how to get dressed fast – I was already among those leaving their homes.

My two children were still fast asleep, two innocent, golden-headed toddlers surrounded by dolls, some large, others very large, which held and sheltered them. Miriam's warm glance accompanied me to the door. My eyes were moist and my throat very tight. I hate leaving the house before dawn; I hate partings.

* * *

People lamented, grieved, and went to work. Scarcely a household was untouched, scarcely a family not torn apart. About a third of the ghetto's population, nearly 10,000 people, were killed in that Aktion, which came to be known forever after as the big Aktion.

And people went back to eating and feeding, quarreling and hoping. They were gradually worn down, sinking into their misery and excruciating pain, but no one lost their mind. Nor did they have the leisure to mourn. The pressure of forced labor, the shortage of food, the fear over what was in store for those of us left alive, left no room for prolonged grief. Flats remained shut, windows dark, doors sealed off by the Komit t. Absence, like a separate being, remained always present, oppressive and demanding. Space was filled by missing faces, the nights overflowed with them, their ghosts wandered everywhere. They dwelled with us as long as we had strength for them. Thus it is with Aktionen – this time, and the times to come.

Several days passed, and a wagon with ghetto policemen began making the rounds from house to house, like the stretcher carriers during the black plague in Father's history books. They opened the sealed flats and loaded up their contents. The neighbors had beaten them to it – the rustle of doors quietly opening and closing could be heard at night all around. My parents decided to keep their hands clean, they would not take part in such things. But when we saw the furnishings of our Parisian neighbors' beautiful flat being loaded onto the wagon, Mother couldn't help asking for one small favor from the Jewish police officer – to leave with us the large doll that my little sister had loved so much. "Impossible," he answered sternly, and when the job was finished, we saw him leave with the doll under his arm.

Mother later regretted her foolishness in sticking fast to high moral scruples under conditions in which they no longer had any place. There came a day when she needed every penny she could get, first to keep her children from starving, and then to save them. Household goods, especially cloth articles of any kind, became the common currency during those years. And why should I complain about the Jewish policeman? When the day came, he and all his colleagues were marched to the same fortress of death.

Two years later, the Germans began removing, burning, and grinding the remains of corpses at the Ninth Fort, trying to cover their tracks. For these cleaning efforts they used crews of Jews who were destined to die, in particular those who were caught escaping to the forests, as well as captive Russian officers. One Christmas night some of these laborers succeeded, by daring ruses, to escape from the Fort and some even returned to the ghetto. But that is another story.

Winter

January

Little time was left to lament and mourn. One wintry Sunday, the weekly day of rest, we were ordered to evacuate within four to six hours, to clear out of our quarter and move to the west, to the other side of Democrats' Square. German logic, cold and severe: since the ghetto population was diminished by a third or more, the ghetto territory could now be considerably reduced. Part of the shrinkage had already taken place by eliminating the little ghetto, and now compression began anew. The process repeated itself over the coming days—the ghetto's territory was lessened piece by piece, and the remaining population became more and more crowded. Time and again people had to take their belongings and find a dwelling in some corner, and soon there were nearly no family apartments. In time, two families found themselves sharing a single room, and there was no end to the quarrels and bitterness. How to find a new place to stay and move to it in a matter of hours? What to take, what to leave behind? Shock and bewilderment. Father was sent to spy out some other place, and Mother began packing furiously. And what would become of our great treasure, the spare logs on the side of the pit in the in the yard—how could we give them up? And then a kind of miracle happened: at midday a group of men and women appeared at our doorstep, like the three angels, and said "We've come to help you." They were teachers, father's former colleagues. We were overcome with emotion and gratitude. They did not linger, as time was short; each of them picked up an object and took it over the evacuation line. Nor did they disdain to take the large wooden beams—two or three pitched in and dragged them across the snow with a rope. I was a bit embarrassed that such well-known and respectable people should work on our behalf at a job that had something demeaning about it. But they took their work seriously, approached it with determination and without hesitation, coming back a second and third time without appearing nearly as disturbed as I was about their social standing. The power of friendship!

It happened on an especially cold day, when the temperature was below minus 30 degrees Celsius. And I do not remember it being particularly cold, perhaps because of my excitement.

Where to take our belongings when we had no new place yet? It was decided that to begin with we would store our things beside Ruhama's house, mother of Arke and Maimke who also belonged to the family of teachers and who lived in the center of the ghetto, not too far away. True, they lived on the second story of a large wooden house, but they had a shed in the yard with room for most of our belongings. We ourselves were invited to spend the first night with her, and in the end we spent several weeks there until we found a place of our own close by.

(And during all these years Ruhama has been living in Israel only a dozen miles away, and I haven't contacted her. I was good friends with Arke and Maimke, and they are gone. Ruhama—whose unique name her children and I had discovered one day before the war in the Jabotinsky Atlas as the name of the southernmost Jewish settlement in Palestine—is part of my childhood, flesh of my flesh. We moved in tandem, our families linked, through most of the ghetto period, and her help on that chaotic day of evacuation was invaluable.)

While we were crossing Democrats' Square for the last time, a new fence was already being stretched behind us. Once more we had changed our dwelling, for the second time in the last six months.

What is a person's house, which he remembers when he is troubled, when his spirits fall; many have been the houses, the addresses where I've been. But among the elusive shelves of my memory, two addresses remain that have something warm about them. One was our home in the old part of our city, with the wide window ledge high on the fourth floor. The second was in the ghetto, at 44 Vigriu Street where we moved from Ruhama's house, and where we lived until the end. That we were in a single room four cubits wide, four long, is of no consequence; that is where I went when the war ended. In the demolished corner of that room I began very hesitantly to burrow, and found there, too, the remnants of our wardrobe. We had brought it with us from the city; it had two doors made of pale wood, with wreathes of leaves carved in relief pasted onto them, somewhat like those I had seen, in our neighborhood,

on the ornate coffins in the shop windows. Nothing was left of the closet but ashes—but in it I found the remains of my own personal drawer, the bottom one on the left. My treasury, my private kingdom, everything I had collected during the ghetto years. The metal objects in the drawer—keys, recognizable locks—were now bent and blackened, and my melted alarm clocks now marked the point in time—and place—where the dams within me burst. I wept without restraint for a long time.

It was a wooden corner house, single-storied, that commanded the intersection of Vigiur and Grinius and had a garden in front. Once the house had been white with a bluish tint, and it had had a flower garden. Remains of the garden were still visible during the first winter, but later its traces disappeared entirely. Our room was precisely the corner one, with an opening through which, in better times, the family must have stepped out to the porch and the garden, there to sit at leisure and sip a cup of tea. We placed our wardrobe up against that door in the corner, and thus I was able to locate its remains when I returned.

Three or four families lived in the rooms of the flat. The main family, who had been there the longest, consisted of a polite and pleasant elderly Yekke couple (Jews of German origin), and their daughter, whom my memory insists on calling Rayah, although the other possible name may have been Lisa, which seems more appropriate. The way to our room led through the communal kitchen. Who had lived here before we came, how they had disappeared, and when, we avoided asking. We lived there for two and a half years, and I do not remember any serious quarrels, probably thanks to Rayah's family. Our room on the corner gave us a lookout advantage, important in ghetto conditions – our two windows faced different directions. Because of the empty lots near our house, we also had sight of Arke and Maimke's house. It was very important to be always on the alert, to look and listen. On the other hand there was a drawback to having windows on the corner of the house—they drew attention, and every evening we had to take care to black them out. Having two windows also made it harder to preserve the heat on winter days, even though they were sealed shut with strips of cloth and flour paste most of the year. In the yard stood the toilet, sheds, and a small house belonging to the Gafanovitches. Their elderly, pleasant-faced

mother spent the day quietly and diligently making *papirosn*—home-made cigarettes—which her sons sold with great success. In the second wing of the house, which also had a small separate staircase of its own, lived one or two other families. Beneath the house lay a cellar with a broken-down door, full of junk and remnants of old furniture.

How we got along with two adults and two children in a single small room, I do not remember. The fact is that my parents had a bed and each of us children had one. A small shelf for books and various household utensils was also crowded in, as well as a table, used mostly for preparing food.

In our former dwelling at the edge of the ghetto, where the nasturtiums grew, I was still an innocent city child, enraptured by the charms of gardens and yards. Echoes of dangers reached me from a distance, storming somewhere beyond the square. By contrast, the house at 44 Vigriu was in the heart of the ghetto, and our fingers felt its pulsebeat day and night. From our windows we could see the Komitāt building, where the Eltestenrat resided, and by it Varniu Street, a major artery cutting across the ghetto, through the northern end of which the Germans entered. In addition, not long after we moved in, in a special shed near the fence not far from our dwelling, was stationed the headquarters of an *NSKK* company (auxiliary forces of the German army), which from that point on sent night patrols along the interior of the fence and also – in pairs – into the main streets of the ghetto.

From our new entrenchment the ghetto seemed diminished and more crowded, the surrounding houses small and transparent, and we ourselves very much exposed. But it was here that my drunken world-boat stabilized, as much as possible. Here were formed routines, friendships, and acquaintances for the years to come. I matured here. And, I owe my very life, among other things, to the chain of circumstances that led me to that house, and so to the good fortune that brought us to live there, thanks to Ruhama, who took us into her house close by on the first night after the evacuation.

First winter in the ghetto. The mass raid on the potato fields took place in late autumn, and when the cold set in, similar raids started on everything made of wood. The first victims were the picturesque fences like the one surrounding our new house, followed by gates, cornices, lattices, gardening sheds, structures in yards and on porches, even telephone and electric poles. As with

the potatoes, these items would be descended upon, as by a swarm of locusts, and in an instant all would be sawn, dismantled, torn and dragged away, gone. Those who had the audacity and strength would even penetrate into houses and yards. I learned a lot during these days about ways of dismantling, sawing, and chopping wooden posts. I had only to hear certain sounds coming from a distance in order to rush to the place and try to join the party. So, by degrees, the houses became more and more naked and exposed, and the ghetto came to look like an ugly plucked fowl. From then on the difference between the two sides of the ghetto fence was discernible not only in the upright posture of those outside it, but also in the enfolding of trees, fences, and fresh flowers that continued to wrap the houses over there, emphasizing the image of bleak desert on this side, like a photographic negative.

At this stage of my accelerated adolescence, I was ready to take part in any act of plunder. Ghetto life turned out to be rich with situations of semi-anarchy from which those who were alert and quick could reap considerable advantages. The terms permitted and forbidden became extremely flexible. I sensed that social success, even among us children, now sided with those who snatched rather than with those with good manners. My parents were not happy, to say the least, with the manners I picked up on the street. They repeatedly tried to forbid me to take part in various lootings and acts of plunder, although it meant renouncing – as they never tired of saying – the material advantages to be derived from my diligent efforts. But they were hard put to withstand the prevailing winds. Other parents gave up trying, or made no attempt to interfere—this was no time to raise questions about education and morals. And I wanted to be like everyone else, to shake off my image of a scholarly child from a good home. I wanted to compete with my peers and succeed. As I had done in Grandfather's shtetl, when I hung on to the Gentile's wagon on the holy Shabbat. I wanted to bring things home, to feed the family as I had done during the first days of the occupation. In spite of themselves, my parents would come to recognize the importance of my contribution to the family and would shower me with praise.

One morning I walked by the large apartment blocks. A crowd of people pushing and struggling around some heap attracted my attention. Apparently,

the adjoining Komit t storehouse had finished sorting the furs which, a few days before—in the dead of winter—the authorities had decreed should be rendered up, and the useless scraps were now thrown out. I immediately joined the press of people, although I had no idea what I would do with any plunder I might take. The place was crawling with scrabblers and rummagers, and although I doubted I would find anything of value in this conglomeration, every once in a while someone would withdraw from it, a satisfied look on his face. By the time I finally reached the remnants of the depleted pile, all I managed to extract from it was a worn-out *muffte* – a hand muff – made of shabby fur.

Satisfied, I made my way outside the ring of those still hurrying in. A short girl, my age or younger, turned to me and asked me to show her what I had. Pleased with my find, even smug, I handed her my prize. She took it and, to my great surprise, turned around and ran away.

For a few seconds, I was stunned—the girl had snatched my loot! Furious, I ran after her, with no intention of giving up. I was in luck—rather than disappear into one of the nearby entrances, she turned east toward the fields on the other side of the apartment blocks. With cries of rage I wrathfully put all my energy into the pursuit, but I was unable to reduce the distance between us—she was apparently faster than I when it came to running, too. We passed the last apartment block and approached the fence of the ghetto along the edge of Democrats' Square. Here, I thought, I was sure to catch her; there was nowhere she could escape to. To my surprise, however, she slipped suddenly into a small, isolated house that was hidden nearby. Sure that I was in the right, I knocked stubbornly at the entrance until a man finally came out. Excitedly, I told him what had happened, and then I caught sight of the very girl herself, peering out from within the dark interior. “There she is—that’s her!” I cried. What happened next is vague, as I recall. Whether he sent me away forthwith, abashed, or whether, as it seems to me, he even asked his daughter if there was any truth to my allegations, I sensed a pretense of innocence in his voice. As for the brash girl, she shamelessly denied my story outright, and even claimed the opposite—that it was I who had tried to wrest the fur from her hands!

Defeated, choking with anger and frustration, with tears in my eyes, I tramped home. My mother did not make things easier by reminding me of what she had always said, that no good would come of all these grabbings, and that it was better to do without them in the first place. Again, I do not remember how she finally gave in to my entreaties, but we both returned to that house. Mother went in alone, stayed a short while, and when she came out, said only that it was best to stay as far away as possible from some people.

It was a bitter lesson for me in the way of the world, and with all my frustrated, anger-flooded heart I wished horrific wishes upon that family and their daughter. Alas, I fear those wishes came true.

February

It was deepest winter, and the cottage tinsmith business was booming. Stoves, cooking ranges, lanterns—I found it hard to understand how, under ghetto conditions, they managed to produce such complex tin items, or whence came the raw materials. In our house, too, a heating stove was installed, whose jointed chimney pipe ran horizontally across the room and protruded through the window. The pipe was a source of pleasant heat, and could be used to hang laundry on, but it was also a perpetual source of worry. It had to be watched constantly to be sure that it was properly sealed, that the smoke going through it was reaching the outside lest we be asphyxiated in our sleep or, at the very least, wake with a bad headache. There was no dearth of stories about people who had grown tired of it all and who, by plugging the chimney, had cut their own journey short.

The situation seemed to stabilize. The Germans repeatedly and pointedly promised that there would be no more Aktionen. In the meantime, everyone was preoccupied with collecting things to use as heating fuel and food to supplement the thin rations. Once in a while, a rare supply of meat with a unique sweetish taste would arrive. Various jokes circulated with it to make swallowing easier—that it was meat from horses killed in battle. Maybe these were the same tired horses that had passed beneath our windows during the first days of the war and had reached no further.

Work brigades went out regularly, even the one for the airport, where work was especially hard in winter because of the mud and snow. But everyone

hoped that continued employment there was some guarantee for our continued existence. The treasury of German curses that we children picked up from adults—a seemingly useless byproduct of work on the brigades —we passed along to one another. There were the old terms that had always been poured upon us, such as:

<i>Donnerwetter</i>	-	Thunder weather/ blast, hell
<i>Verfluchte Jude</i>	-	Accursed Jew
<i>Schweine, Schweinerei</i>	-	Swine, swinishness
<i>Hunde</i>	-	Dog
<i>Scheissjude</i>	-	shit Jew

To these were added more specific abuses directed by taskmasters to the labor gangs:

<i>Untermensch</i>	-	Subhuman
<i>Verwurfe</i>	-	Monster
<i>Dreckige Bande</i>	-	Shitty band
<i>Schneller</i>	-	Faster
<i>Los, los!!</i>	-	Forward, get a move on
<i>Tempo!!!</i>	-	Pace, rhythm

This too is one part of my "universities".

From the eastern front, gladdening rumors reached us about the ravages of "General Winter." While winter weighed heavily on us, too, it had also blocked the Germans at the gates of Moscow, taking its toll in casualties. Hospitals in the city filled with the wounded, and the ghetto workshops were flooded with special orders. Those who knew history and other seers of salvation hastened to draw encouraging parallels with the adventures of Napoleon on that same exact route, and for a while people's outlook brightened somewhat.

The Komitāt and the Jewish Police routines became more entrenched, and with them flourished an outrageous and galling protectionism. The public gradually grew accustomed to the burden of domination imposed upon it, venting its frustration, among other ways, in bitter and biting ghetto songs about the "shishkas" (pine cones), that is, the senior members of the Komitāt, who behaved like lords with blatant favoritism. One day I managed to persuade my parents to agree to my suggestion that I too be allowed to take a

peddler's box and set up shop by the Komitāt fence to sell small goods. Many boys peddled items of various kinds throughout the ghetto, and I wished to do it, too. During our migrations from one dwelling to another, we had collected a number of small items that were of no use now that we were crowded into a single small room. I claimed we could get a few pennies (Pfenigs, to be precise) for them. Among our treasures were a few pairs of shoelaces, some bars of soap, round chicory sticks, pieces of bluing for laundry, and tins of shoe polish. Some had remained in the pantry of Mottel's family, others perhaps came from the articles Uncle David had brought with him on his vacation. Hesitantly, after repeated refusals, my parents agreed that I could set out with my merchandise the following day. My joy knew no bounds. They got me a little box, we arranged the goods in it in a certain order, and they even discussed with me the techniques of setting prices for each item – whether I should put out written price tags or, like a seasoned merchant, only proclaim prices orally, so I could change them during the bargaining.

I was proud to be a partner at last in shouldering the household burden—after all, we never stopped discussing, on a daily basis, how we might obtain a few more extra crumbs. And in preparation, early the previous afternoon—it was a Thursday—I went to the Komitāt building to find in advance the spot I would stake out the following morning. I also had a very important decision to make about how to display my wares – whether standing, or should I rather sit on a brick that I could bring with me, with my box on the ground beside me?

As always, people were standing about at the Komitāt, checking the various announcements that were regularly hung on the wooden fence, the only one that remained at the time in the entire ghetto. A fresh notice that people were crowding around drew my attention. It was a call for 500 healthy people who could work well, for temporary work in Riga. Volunteers would receive particularly good conditions, larger food rations, and would return several months later. Suitable people, and anyone who wasn't scheduled for work the following day, were ordered to appear at 10:00 a.m. for roll call and selection. The announcement was straightforward and not particularly threatening, and the reaction of the people reading it was not agitated either. When I went home, I told my parents about it, while I myself continued energetically with the arrangements for the important event the next day.

That Friday was a sunny winter day, the sixth of February, the coldest month of the year. Snow gleamed in the empty lots, accentuating like a wall the narrow pedestrian paths. I was ready to go on my way that morning, but to my great disappointment, my parents prevented me from leaving —anxiety had meanwhile set in over the demand for workers in Riga and the upcoming roll call. At that point in the ghetto's existence, we already had many good reasons to be suspicious of every roll call and conscription of volunteers. Between themselves, my parents had also agreed that even though Father was scheduled for a day at home, he would not attend roll call for several reasons—first, he was already enrolled in the airport brigade, and in addition he was on the school staff, which might still renew its activity. But primarily, he had secretly been appointed ghetto historian. The *Komität* members would undoubtedly cover for his failure to appear.

Although no curfew had been called, the ghetto seemed rather empty – the brigades had gone to work, and those remaining were principally the elderly, children, mothers, and people from the night shift who had just returned to their houses. Dressed in warm winter clothes, disappointed and frustrated, I played in the empty lot in front of our house, trying to console myself by rolling a large snowball that I planned to make into a snowman. From winter to winter, the size of the snowballs that I could roll and pile up was a challenge and a gauge of my growth and strength. It was almost noon when Father came out and asked me to join him – he had decided to go to the selection lot. During the course of the day, all the houses would be inspected anyway, and he preferred to get it over with because he had a lot to do. He had also consulted senior officials who had promised he would not be taken, no matter what happened. It would take him half an hour, no longer. For extra security, he asked me to come along.

I willingly complied—gone were the days when I had taken walks with Father through fields or wandered with him to the libraries and newspaper offices. The selection was taking place in a lot on the other side of the three apartment blocks; when we arrived, the crowd was very small. The inspection process was proceeding slowly, conducted by Jewish policemen with a German or two in attendance, and there was no particular tension. Additional soldiers were stationed some distance away, but did not interfere. People

arrived in a thin, trickling stream, showed their documents, and intended to return home. But then something different and unexpected began happening—everyone who came was detained and not allowed to return home.

Those in charge claimed that the delay was temporary, perhaps only for re-inspection, since a general search of the ghetto would be starting soon, anyway. But since some attempts did succeed, and certain people were allowed to go home after all, we began to grasp that all was not going smoothly. Father tried to persuade the sorters to let him go home as well, and even hinted that he had special duties. The person in charge agreed with him and promised him that a senior member of the *Komität* would be arriving soon, and he would no doubt set matters straight. Father then requested that they at least allow his little boy to return home in the meantime. This they allowed, so on the spot I took to my heels, left Father, and hurried home to tell Mother what had happened. We had agreed that if Father did not follow me shortly, Mother should alert the authorities. But where was Mother at the time? Why had Father gone to the selection lot even though they had decided otherwise in advance? We thrashed out these questions over and over again during the coming days.

Scene: On my way home, I am about to cross Varniu Street, which is paved and somewhat raised from its surroundings. Just as I am about to step down to the road leading straight home, I glance up momentarily and see from afar, in a direct line ahead of me in the middle of the road, the figure of my mother hurrying toward me. From a distance we recognize each other, and for an instant we pause, I alone, she with my sister in her arms. We understand everything. *End of scene.*

This image has haunted me for years; it feels like Munch's *The Scream*—everything frozen in anticipation of a terrible disaster just about to happen. A few more seconds, and we were moving towards each other. Mother heard me tell the first details. She quickly trudged past me, my sister hanging on her hip and I running behind them. For some reason I felt a need to defend Father against Mother's anger. It appeared she knew nothing of Father's plans. She had stepped out to the neighbors for a minute, and when,

upon returning, she neither met him, nor found me, she knew in her heart that something was wrong.

As we hurried along, retracing my steps toward the selection lot, and just crossing Varniu Street, there suddenly appeared before us from the road diagonally behind the big blocks, a column of marching people, row after row, surrounded by guards with rifles at the ready. Who were they? Where did they come from? For a moment I didn't understand – everything was conducted with such purposeful silence, with no complaint or protest. Only the quiet murmur of marchers, the vigorous crunch of feet on snow, a few harsh rebukes from the armed escorts, nothing more.

Then with a jolt I realized that these were the very men that I had left behind me only moments before in the selection lot, now being led away already. Had Father been released? Mother ran forward to search the marchers' faces up close; I ran behind her. Whether she heard his voice or recognized his face, she was shortly in the marchers' way – she in front, I in back, recoiling from the approaching columns and from the Germans surrounding them – when a sharp cry broke the air: **HALT!** As if she had not heard the clear order, Mother turned to the German, ready to explain to him in fluent German that there was some mistake – they had no need of her husband in Riga; his family was staying here; here was his tiny daughter in her arms; he himself was a vital worker; she could bring papers to that effect immediately. However, he seemed uninterested in her pleas from the start. Taking no heed of her, he only raised his rifle, pointing it straight at Mother, and repeated in a louder, more strident tone: **Halt! Halt!**

HALT!

HALT!

HALT!

HALT!

I close my eyes, and turn to stone.

The column stops. The entire world stands still. Everyone looks to see what will happen. My mother stumbles slightly as she stops in the middle of her running near the entrance to a house, freezes in place, my little sister in her

arms. Opposite her, four or five steps away, stands the German, the butt of his rifle locked against his shoulder, his head cocked to one side, the barrel of the rifle aimed at Mother, his finger on the trigger—ready to fire, standing position.

Mother only emitted a short, stifled “Oh!”—not loud at all. Darkness had descended, even stars could not be seen. The ensuing split seconds crawled segment by segment with astonishing slowness.

The German gave a derisive growl, maybe he meant to laugh, and he slowly lowered his rifle. The earth renewed its movement and the column its march. A few seconds more and the column disappeared from sight.

In shock, we stayed where we were. A minute, two minutes, an hour? It was a stillness that stretched to infinity. Slowly, defeated and exhausted, we began plodding back home – I, my mother, and my little sister.

As soon as we arrived home, Mother began running to senior officials and friends, urging them to do something, to cancel the decree. It appeared that the ghetto authorities had failed to round up 500 volunteers as commanded, so they started collecting everyone who came their way without much sorting. They had even commandeered brigade men returning from work in order to meet the quota. They were all being held in the train station, and hadn’t yet been sent on their way. Members of the *Komität* were attempting to return a number of essential persons from those taken, and the Germans had promised to cooperate. Thus they tried to calm Mother—everything would be done to bring Father back.

That afternoon and evening, a painful ache spread into my legs. When I had felt similar aches before, they had been dismissed as growing pains. This time, however, the pain was worse than ever before. Were they perhaps rheumatic, of the kind that often afflicted Mother? She offered me a hot water bottle (*garelke*) and covered me with a warm blanket—but nothing helped. True, I had been running around all day in the cold and snow, but that was no different from the days before. Mother took camphor alcohol and started rubbing my calves and thighs with slow, wavelike motions (she was ever the compassionate nurse), but the pains only grew. My groans gradually turned to wailings that could be heard outside. I refused to be calmed.

What must Mother have been feeling, when instead of hurrying out to stand guard, she had to stay at home and care for her sobbing son, massaging his legs but achieving no relief? Only towards midnight did I finally fall asleep, probably from exhaustion. Father said that Mother failed to attend to his affairs because she had one of the migraine attacks from which she had suffered in the past. Perhaps that is what happened, or perhaps that is merely Father's interpretation.

When I woke up the next morning, I did not find Father in our room. The pain in my legs had disappeared as if it had never been, and only the strong odor of camphor hung in the air, a smell I was not to forget for years.

As for the train, it was delayed in the station all that night, and in the morning it left. A few of those taken away came back, but Father was not among them. Later, some parts of the picture fell in place for me. As it happened, Father was listed among those who should have returned. Komit t workers later claimed they had called his name several times, in vain. Father, for his part, maintained that no cries reached his ears in the crowded rail car. He was tired and overwhelmed; how was he to hear voices from the platform? When I heard this, I was unable to suppress a thought, a snide one perhaps, that Father must have been wrapped up at the time, as usual, in conversation. And why did his seekers give up? It is possible that another man, quicker and sharper than Father, answered in his place, was whisked out of the car and sent back to the ghetto. Father has a different story, laced with not a little cynical sarcasm. The very fact that he had been looked for came to his knowledge – adding to his pain – only several days after the event. During a stop at Keidan on the way to Riga, he was called out of the train. When he turned up, he was scolded for not answering the call in the railway station in our city. "Trying to get out of supporting your wife and children, eh?"—thus he was reprimanded by the German, a man "with a strong sense of duty".

Mother remained convinced that if she had been free that evening, and not compelled to attend to my pains, she would not have given up, and Father would have been returned. To her credit I must say that although she dwelt often on the subject, I never felt that she blamed me directly. Her heart was bitter and heavy about Father to the end of days. Why had he gone out to the square without any compulsion to go, and why did he trust the promises of the

officials? She was out of the house only a short while, and look what happened. Moreover, the ghetto itself was never searched to fill the quota; they had only taken the innocents and shlimazels who were at hand and left with them. And on and on.

Once and once only has my Father addressed the issue, in passing, as it were—for we do not often discuss these topics, and he has not yet heard what I remember about those days, perhaps because of his unwillingness to touch painful scars. I mustered the courage to ask what had suddenly made him decide to go to the selection lot that day. Father only shrugged his shoulders with embarrassment—he didn't know then and even now he has no clear answer. Instead, as is his wont, he launched into a different story, about something that happened to him on the train on the way to Riga. For Father is well known as a fascinating storyteller, and our acquaintances cannot understand why I am not impressed by his talent.

Nevertheless, there is something special about Father's story, a tale within a tale. Among those crammed against each other in the car on the long journey to Riga, there was one man who, upon hearing Father's name and occupation, recalled an incident that had happened to him several months previously, during the first days of the war. While he was trying to flee eastward on one of the last trains, the train had been hit, and its passengers had escaped into the forest. There, during his subsequent wanderings, he had encountered a Soviet soldier, a Jew from Byelorussia, who was also fleeing, and they had fallen in together for a few days. When the soldier found out that the man was from our city, he boasted of having a relative there, a well-known teacher and author, and named my father. He was also able to add various details about other relatives in Lithuania. In time, the man in the train went on, the two of them had parted ways and the young soldier disappeared. So it must have been one of the lively sons who belonged to a branch of my family on my grandfather the Rabbi's side, with roots in the vicinity of Bobruisk in White Russia. The many members of my family had not met one another since the Bolshevik Revolution, but had evidently kept in touch. After the war, not one of the Byelorussian tribe remained. With unconcealed envy I glance sometimes at obituaries signed by so many relatives. Several generations must pass before my own family is also able to publish such notices.

The Next Day

The next day we found ourselves a smaller, amputated family. It had happened so suddenly, almost inadvertently; it was hard to get used to the fact that from now on we too were among the afflicted families. Similarly, I found it hard, after the war, to get used to the idea that, without a father and mother, I too was considered an orphan, like the miserable children I had seen before the war, walking in the public gardens in a long column, two by two, dressed in uniforms.

From that point on the three of us were left alone, a mother and two young children. How strange, how inconceivable—until yesterday his corner had been there, his clothing, his things, his little notes, and in an instant – he was gone. A foundation stone of our world had been displaced overnight. And even though we felt from the first that he had been taken to a definite place and had not been executed immediately, that he might even return soon, it was hard for each of us, each one of us separately and perhaps for my little sister more than the others, to grow accustomed to his absence.

And my mother, who had struggled so hard in the past against being chained to the kitchen among pots and pans, against an ordinary life in which she was destined to do nothing but raise children, was now in spite of herself solely responsible, not only for our upkeep, but for our very existence.

Some time after he was taken we received a first message from him. He had indeed been taken to Riga and was living and working there. Why had the Germans transferred those 500 there (in fact, only about four hundred) from our city, and thousands of Jews more from other places? And why had they found it necessary, as I now know, to kill Riga's tens of thousands of original Jewish inhabitants?

Those transported to Riga eventually found ways to send us letters, and we were very moved. Already this set me apart from the rest of my friends whose fathers were missing—they knew nothing of their fathers' fate, or whether they were still alive. Riga was not far away; there were those who traveled from here to there and from there here. Sometimes letters would arrive by regular mail between the two cities, carried by communications personnel, a Latvian

there, a Lithuanian here. In his letters – the letters of a graduate of a Lithuanian university, written in fluent Lithuanian—each of us had a common, Lithuanian fictional name, figments of Father's creative imagination. I became Saulutis ("son of the sun"); my sister – Yulite; Mother was Liah; and father himself was Isidoras. The correspondence lasted, a little at a time, for a rather long while. It was madness—routine mail passing between two planets, both of them out of this world.

I recently heard from Father that a few months after being taken away, the Germans permitted a few families from our ghetto to join their loved ones in Riga. I remember Mother once making efforts to send an urgent letter to Father, asking for a quick reply. Perhaps she was asking his advice about just such an opportunity then being offered to her.

So it was for the rest of our time in the ghetto: from time to time, a Hamlet-like, fateful question would pose itself to Mother about her family and her two cubs, and alone, in utter darkness, she had to decide whether to seize the initiative, to interfere with the course of things, to deviate from the path we were on. And Mother would decide. And this time, too, as was often the case, she decided that we would stay put. From where I stand now, from a purely selfish point of view, it was the right decision. The move to Riga would probably have benefited my parents themselves, probably increasing my mother's chances of survival. But her chances, with hindsight, of rescuing us in strange and unfamiliar surroundings, would certainly have been minimal. At some point, we survivors are destined, cruelly and at the cost of feeling guilty all our lives, to fall in with that sequence of steps that led eventually to our rescue. Shlomit left through a gap in the camp fence against her father's wishes. She never saw her parents again, and she carries the feelings of guilt to this day.

From then on, Father left the circle of our lives. The events of his life were now inseparable from the fate of the Jews of the Riga ghetto, with all its storms and vicissitudes. Only a little of it is known to me. He was put to work ironing in a tailor shop. Like all the others transported from our city, he was held in a separate section of the ghetto, although he was not cut off from the rest of those imprisoned there. I discovered this from a chance remark made by Hinda, who eventually became Moshele Sherman's wife, and who was among those taken. Once she mentioned

to me that, on Sundays, the men from our city would go to them, the women of the main ghetto, for some hot soup and to have clothes mended. Even in the Riga ghetto, Father managed to follow what was happening, to engrave events in his memory, and even to send a report to our *Komität*—it has survived in his handwriting—about the hardships and condition of those exiled from our town. In addition, years later, he reconstructed, with the eyes of a historian, several chapters of that ghetto's story, such as the case of the arms stockpile for an uprising that never took place. And they are written in the chronicles of the Riga ghetto.

The Quiet Season / Childhood in the Ghetto

A Kind of Preface

People in the ghetto became more and more accustomed to their peculiar condition. Life before the war became wrapped in the veil of a distant fable. Vain hopes of sudden miracles and last-minute salvation were held no longer. The war front receded gradually, hovering somewhere between Moscow and Stalingrad, and what was happening there—the rumor mill was our only source of hope—did not help things here. The Germans, for their part, made it known repeatedly that only faithful and diligent work in the brigades would save us from calamity.

One tends to think of the anxieties and fears, the efforts to escape and be saved that filled people's thoughts, as the property of all ghetto residents. But I was largely unaware of what it meant to go to work every day at forced labor. Day in, day out, months on end; what a waste of passing years! People sought ways of joining easier brigades, seeking special protection (it was called "vitamin P") to get assignments to workshops in the ghetto or in the ever-growing *Komität* departments.

Study groups sprang up, as did a choir and an orchestra, and home-based industries flourished, run usually by women or elderly people. Embroidered goods, tailoring and sewing, carpentry and tin-smithing—any product that could be moved and smuggled through the ghetto gate for trade with the Lithuanians. Dr. Gurvitch and her daughters, for instance, developed a homemade method, which soon became widespread, of printing colorful headscarves with beautiful designs and fast dyes. They were not difficult to make, and before long most of the Lithuanian women in the city and in the villages around it were wearing headkerchiefs produced by Jewish women in the ghetto.

And throughout this time, there was ceaseless movement in the streets of the ghetto. This was doubtless the sight we presented from the other side of the fence: figures in layers of clothing, all marked by the yellow star, continually gathering, moving between houses and through streets empty of vehicles, among buildings stripped of any wooden facade or ornament, with never a

dog or a cat to be seen. It was conspicuous especially on weekends—everyone visited everyone else, if they still had anyone to visit. It was a way for the ghetto body to release its accumulated tension.

Sometimes, too rarely, warning sirens would reach us from the direction of the city, followed by muffled buzzing sounds from high in the sky, like the delicate murmuring hum of gathering angels, an indistinct, otherworldly presence passing high above without sending us any clear message, without leaving any traces. Much strength of soul and patience were required in those days.

Bubble within a Bubble

"The quiet season"—thus we called the days after Father was taken, a period that lasted about a year and a half, even though the chronicles of the ghetto overflow, during this time, too, with endless descriptions of harsh events. It was as if we were trapped inside a bubble of air in a sinking ship—for the moment we breathed and hoped, but not a soul knew whether the diminishing air would last until the rescuers arrived.

Within this pocket of air, a bubble within a bubble—for the space of two winters and summers—was the life we children led. Like minnows swimming confidently through the clear waters of a tidal pool, unaware of the receding ocean, of the fast-approaching tide, so were we. Ignoring as much as possible what was happening around us, our childhood went by. We were abandoned during the day, with no school—it had been outlawed—since then our mothers, too, including my own, were compelled to work outside the home, and so we were left to our own devices to fill our days. We played and played from morning to night. Like a vine, whose roots grapple with obstructions and send down shoots even among stones and boulders, we kept on growing. In retrospect, those of us who were destined to live gathered experiences to last a lifetime; those whose fate was already sealed, even though they did not know it, grew like plants in distress that hurry to bloom, trying to accomplish all that they could. But at the time, each of us might have belonged to either group.

One bright summer day, when I was four, Mother suddenly left our summer camp, moving slowly through the gate in the yard, and drove to the city. A few days later I was told I had a new baby sister, and on the following day we

went to visit Mother and the baby in hospital. Long white corridors on the second floor, mute identical rooms. In one of them I discovered my mother, together with other, unfamiliar women, lying in bed with a baby daughter attached to her, who was consuming all her attention. All day long I stood outside the room, sobbing, filled with an inexplicable sense of hurt, nor would I go inside. A few days later they took me again to accompany Mother and the new baby home in a taxi. At the time, the boulevard was packed with a Maccabbi (Jewish youth movement) parade, and the taxi could scarcely move. At home, we feasted on sliced salami and tea. I scarcely looked at my new companion.

Now, morning found my sister and me alone every day. Food would be ready on the range; beside it would be a note explaining what the dish was and how to warm it up. I nearly saved one such note from my mother, and its memory still wrenches my heart.

I have relatively more memories of this "quiet" season than of other periods. I would have been, in normal times, in grades four and five in school.

I would help my five-year-old sister get dressed, we would have something to eat, and out I would go. Our elderly neighbors were there to be called upon if necessary, but in practice we spent all day in the streets or in our friends' flats—for they had no parents at home, either—doing what children do and looking after ourselves.

What did my sister do with her friends all day? They dug in sand, made mudpies and fed them to their dolls, recounting to each other their babies' superior qualities and the troubles they had with them. They had a large number of babies. It seemed they never stopped bearing and raising children. Where in fact did they see that happening? For at the time, bearing children was already forbidden in the ghetto. And how do I have such a distinct memory of this little-girl custom—perhaps I observed it only in my own children, and not in the ghetto at all? Things are gradually mixing up; it becomes harder and harder to distinguish between then and now, between those who were close to me in the past and those in the present.

At noon we would meet and heat up the food Mother had prepared. Though we separated during the day, we knew we had to keep track of each other, and not at a distance, either. My sister always had to inform me of her

whereabouts and to return home by dark, all according to Mother's instructions. I was the big brother, and in Father's absence I felt myself, together with Mother, responsible for my little sister. She rebelled more than once; I forgave her each time.

The Gang

We seemed to have plenty of time on our hands, time filled with much activity. I do not remember this period as being boring or wasted in idleness. I spent most of the day with my friends, Arke and Maimke and their friends. When the weather was good and conditions were right, we were outdoors; this was the great time of games. On cold, rainy, or "bad" days, we stayed in someone's flat. In winter we built snowmen and had snowball fights, like children all over the world. Very few had real sleds, made of arched wooden slats on steel blades, the kind I had dreamt for years of owning, and they were greatly envied: but by this time they had probably been handed in, if only because of the steel blades. Instead, we improvised sleds made of a broad plank resting on two narrow, polished slats. We would slide them in every direction we could push them. The large open pits that had been dug in several lots were great attractions, and one with especially steep sides became the favorite spot for dangerous sliding. We would speed down from directly opposite sides, so that there was often only a hair's-breadth difference between a daring descent and a head-on collision. One of the remaining ghetto photographs shows children running with their sleds in just such a pit. One of the children might be me.

Among the indoor games we played for days on end were not only chess and checkers, monopoly and various card games, but also other competitions. Victory in these helped determine one's social standing. I liked those in which we had to compile the longest list of authors, places, or objects beginning with a certain letter. I wanted very much to succeed among Arke's and Maimke's peers, and in contests of this sort I was at my best. When my knowledge ran out, I would diligently take up the *Children's Magazine* volume at home, or the annual report of the Historico-Ethnographic Society, assiduously copying out every name beginning with the required letter.

With Arke and Maimke I discovered the world. We were a group of good children, possessed of bright minds, an active and high-spirited bunch. What was new to me was already familiar to them. From them I learned about the champions Kapablanca and Emanuel Lasker in chess; about Zamora, the legendary soccer goalkeeper from Spain; about the boxing champions Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis. Nothing seemed to escape them. There was no safer place than their company. I discovered only recently the secret of their relatively greater knowledge, which I always took for granted. Most of the boys were a year or two older than I, and I never noticed it until Ruchama pointed it out to me now.

In summer we played various ball games, although real balls were scarce. My friends introduced me to the game of soccer. One day I joined Arke and Maimke on their way to play, thinking we were about to watch a game of basketball, which I already knew a little about. To my surprise, the players ran back and forth after the ball, kicking it, returning, and kicking it again, without ever getting to the face-off, or so I interpreted it, to decide which team would start with the ball. That was my first encounter with soccer.

When we couldn't play soccer outdoors, and we tired of chess, a new game rose to eminence—table soccer played with buttons. And these are the rules of button-soccer, invented and developed by 10 to 13-year-old children in the Kovno Ghetto: on a large plank or table, we drew a detailed soccer field in colored lines. On each side of the centerline we stationed eleven player buttons, different colors for the different sides, sized according to their positions on the field. The ball was a small, smooth brass button. Using a spoon or a curved knife blade, we would press the round edges of our player button, propelling the ball-button forward toward the opposing team's goalpost. Each side took turns propelling the ball, several children manning its players.

There were home games as well as league games, with an enthusiastic crowd of spectators.

This thrilling game occupied much of our time and often made parents worry because we came home late. It was a complex project, requiring a great deal of organization – finding a very large board, drawing the field with clean lines, setting it up in a room large enough to hold it, and policing the excited

spectators to keep them from sprawling over the table. Contests of this kind were always full of opportunities for bending rules, advantage-taking, and employing ruses of various kinds – who could referee and make rulings? Therefore, a set of detailed rules and regulations was enacted, similar to those used in the real game, presided over by a referee who ruled on what was permissible and what not. My friends were good at following the rules and regulations. Maimke, with great astuteness, was forever testing the limits of the law; Arke, his senior by two years, was a rock of honesty and fairness, all responsibility and sobriety. His face would flush red with anger at his younger brother's provocations, the liberties he took, playing however he liked.

I do not remember the names of the main organizers, but their faces are ever before me. The wish somehow to reconstruct their names with someone's help rises uncontrollably, some sign by which to identify them—but there is no one to ask, no one with whom to clear the matter up.

Two brothers who lived up Grinius Street and another tall, broad-shouldered boy were among those who carried authority and set the tone. The latter lived next door to us on the side facing the fence. In spite of his height, and probably his age, too, he was comfortable with us younger boys. He was never condescending or haughty, and his smile was pleasant and authoritative. One day he invited us to his flat, where we found the rooms and porch full of set chessboards. Who is playing, who are we waiting for? And so I learned about simultaneous chess. First our best players tried their hand against the rest of us; then we invited champions from other neighborhoods to compete against our own champions.

I am occasionally surprised at how my present life comes up against incidents from decades ago, almost on a daily basis. When we passed by a display of sculptures made up almost entirely of buttons in the foyer of a theater, without thinking I found myself estimating their value in the exchange market, where as children in the ghetto we were wont to do. Depending on their relative size, we would rank them *einke*, *zweike*, *dreike* – a one, a two, a three, and so on.

Among my friends at the time was one extraordinary child who lived across the empty lot, opposite our house, and who stood out among us by virtue of his adult seriousness and his courteous manners. His German-speaking family was from Austria, apparently brought here by the vicissitudes of war.

Their spotlessly clean flat was full of books, art albums, encyclopedias, and embroidery. Proudly, Johann showed me his collections: sparkling mineral crystals, dried plants, insects with tiny pins piercing their backs. Best of all was the microscope through which he could look, and the drawings he made of his observations, executed in fine, precise lines in a special notebook. At the time, he seemed like a magician or wizard, conversant with distant worlds. While he showed me his treasures, his parents looked on with pride, taking a polite interest in their son's guest. I felt a wordless respect towards these people, who succeeded in raising a barrier between themselves and the ghetto fence. I am not entirely certain of the boy's name; perhaps it was Hans. But I am certain that he came from Innsbruck. Someday, perhaps, when I meet someone from that city, I will ask them whether they know anything about this family.

Abandoned Goods

And in summer and winter we roamed about, snooping, collecting, and hoarding. By then people had begun to lose their vitality, and they tired of dragging the remnants of their old homes with them, gradually leaving them behind. Daily routines were upset; things fell apart, and one of the results of this whirlpool was abandonment. The contents of a flat whose inhabitants had been uprooted or had passed on, or a pile of discarded personal items—one person's calamity was another's fortune. And, like ever-scouting ants who alert their comrades, we developed special senses to discover and descend upon abandoned possessions.

Lawlessness surrounded us. (So it was later in our city, with the return of the Russians, and later still in Szczecin, Berlin, and Munich, stations of my wanderings; so too, in Jaffa, Israel, in 1948; in Ras-Sudar, the Sinai Peninsula, in 1956; in Al-Qunaytrah on the Golan Heights in 1967; on the shores of the Bitter Lake in Egypt in 1973. Again and again, the sight of hurriedly abandoned flats, houses that are homes no longer, their guts spilling outside, entire lives irreparable upset by war.)

A flat abandoned by its owner seems to have lost its soul, its bundles of possessions are like so many dead bodies. We would go indifferently past the old clothes, bedsheets, worn shoes, and household utensils scattered all over.

How did people come to have so many pins, thread, and buttons? Among wrinkled curtains and broken suitcases out would spill, bundle after bundle of family photographs, ripped packages of personal letters tied with ribbons, honorary certificates and genealogical records, scriptures and prayerbooks. Entire lifetimes would pour through our rummaging fingers without making us blink. We were after brass buttons, stamped picture postcards, locks, alarm clocks with gears we could take apart, Czarist banknotes with fabulous watermarks, German Marks bearing intoxicating values in the millions. We never found anything of any real worth, but, like fevered gold-diggers, we continued to nourish our burrowing obsession, overturning, emptying, scattering in our search for that unique, rare, we-never-knew-quite-what that might be waiting for us under the next heap. Oh, that hopeless greed. And, in addition, I always searched for books, and more books.

Books an Old Love

By being taken away from us, Father was spared this one anguish—the book Aktion, which fell upon us several weeks after he was exiled. The decree was to give up all books—a senseless idea, impossible to accept, yet at that stage in the ghetto's existence, we were nearly beyond incredulity. With heavy hearts we set off to place our books at one of the collection points. Mother dared to leave a book or two at home, as did others. Shulamit and Izza Rabinovitz, our loyal friends from the ghetto, did wonders, leaving many books at home. Years later, Shulamit told me how, even when they moved into the ghetto, they had deliberated between their many items of furniture, and their sizeable library, some of which came from their grandfather, the well-known Rabbi Itzhak Elchanan. Even then she had decided the books were preferable. Now they arranged a special hiding place behind an interior staircase. During the next two years, I was one of the regulars who enjoyed this hidden treasure.

Handing the books over took place at a relatively easy pace. Gradually, they were transferred from the initial collection points to the Great Yeshiva building, while many remained lying about the collection points and along the road. In the Yeshiva the books were sorted, and most of them were taken to wherever they were taken. The rest stayed where they were, with a strict prohibition

against taking them back. I would linger about these places, tunneling and browsing among the mounds of books, moved by an infinite want.

Scene: Varniu Street, the ghetto's main artery. I am engrossed in burrowing through a pile of books near the blocks of flats. While bending over a steep pile of heavy volumes, I glance up and see, coming straight towards me from across the street, none other than Zelda. Is it she? I have not seen her for years, not since the end of second grade. I remembered a slender face; blond, boyishly short hair; chubby, dimpled cheeks; almond-shaped blue eyes that looked at you with a dreamy, confusing gaze. She was a princess among the girls of the class, the object of my secret infatuation. Now her face was sunk and ashen. She pulled her younger sister behind her, both of them dressed carelessly in tattered clothes. Could it be? Her appearance grieved me. She was one of the girls whose heart I had tried to win by promising, among other things, that I would smooth their collection of wrinkled silver foil overnight, using a miracle machine I had. And so every day I would bring them sparkling new sheets of foil in place of the old ones they had given me—all to make them like me more. In third grade, under Soviet rule, we were separated into different—Yiddish, not Hebrew-speaking—schools she was the one I loved most, the one I took aboard with me in the airship that I would steer through the skies during lessons. As captain, I would raise and lower the levers, drop the hidden anchor, and increase the ire of our teacher Tscharneh, an elderly spinster. "Must I rend open my breast and show you my heart?" she would cry in desperation, seeing our indifference. The Germans had no doubts about her—when the time came, they took her too.

Sheltered by the heap of books I now covertly examined Zelda, and noticed, with a certain satisfaction, the wretched appearance of this former object of my fantasies. Sadness reflected from her slender face and her almond eyes. The cruelty of a child. When she advanced toward me, I crouched behind the encyclopedias. She passed, and I never saw her again. *End of scene.*

The Never-Ending Refuge

In all hours, in all circumstances; in bad weather, by day and by night; by oil wick and by carbide lantern; during the long waits for Mother to return from work or, by contrast, during the anxious times we spent expecting something

bad to happen—I read books. We no longer had real books, except for two volumes of collections—one a volume of the *Children's Magazine* in Yiddish from America that often mentioned Haim Zhitlovsky, and the annual report of the Historico-Ethnographic Society in our city. I leafed through and read both books from cover to cover dozens of times, and knew their contents in minute detail. I also drank in everything that came my way in Yiddish, Hebrew, or Lithuanian, not disdaining even Gothic or Cyrillic script. Some of the books I came across were off-beat and bizarre publications—I read them all, a rich and stimulating kaleidoscope that an ordinary child might never see. I swallowed it all and soaked it up.

There was some excellent fiction. Trembling with pleasure, I read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and other books by Jules Verne, about Vinetto by Karl May, *Memoirs of the House of David* by Wolfovsky, and alongside these, with my romantic Mother's warm recommendation, the works of Romain Rolland, as far as I could understand them. Books with an alluring but uncomprehended scent of sexuality also fell into my hands, such as *Noah Pandre* by Schneour, *Mary* by Shalom Ash, and *My Wife* by Artzibashev. And what spurred my interest in them, if not the casual remarks made by Mother that such books were still unsuitable for me? And even if I did not understand the main point, the passages that I still recall from these and other books bear witness that my reading was not completely lost. One day my mother returned from her Sunday meetings with a *History of Human Culture, Part I - China*, in her hands. I opened the weighty book; we looked together at the rich and colorful illustrations printed in the frontispiece, and the rustling of celestial wings filled our tiny room; we were seized by an exaltation as if we were entering a high and spacious hall, my mother and I.

But most captivating of all were Captain Nemo and his courageous crew of sailors aboard the Nautilus. With keen intelligence and wisdom he overcame all obstacles; walls of undersea rock could not stop him; he sailed around icebergs and to the poles of the earth, and even made his way through the Suez Canal. When in distress, he holed up with his crew on a secret, isolated island that belonged to them alone, and from a fortress-like rock—I can still remember how I imagined its appearance—they repulsed with rifles their evil attackers. Oh, how I longed to be one of Captain Nemo's crew! In a secret

tunnel my mother, my little sister, and I might reach the river bank, there to board the Nautilus and sail away to distant shores and another life.

Until such time as the submarine arrived, I would immerse myself in plans to revive and make a garden of the Sahara Desert by a simple and logical method: a network of canals would divide the huge wasteland into a checkerboard pattern of squares; through them the waters of the Mediterranean would flow, irrigating the land and bringing happiness to mankind.

One day Arke, who knew that I was an avid reader, asked me matter-of-factly whether Eskimos weren't a very strong people. I was so pleased that he would turn to me as to an expert, so flattered by his interest, that I jumped on the bed and there held forth to him, with growing enthusiasm, while my feet got tangled in our woolen blanket, on the height and strength of the Eskimos, sons of the vast spaces between Greenland and Iceland, giants nourished by the fat of seals. With my arms gesturing toward the ceiling, I demonstrated to the amused Arke how a single Eskimo, were he to find himself under the wooden bridge of the Little Ghetto—while it still existed—could raise it like Samson uprooting the Gates of Gaza and pulling down the pillars of Ashkelon. We urgently needed at the time, Arke, Maimke, and I, fearless heroes. Little did we imagine how much we would need their help.

Scene: One Sunday, I am lying down, ill, reading a book by Jules Verne about whale hunting. At a certain moment—I remember it, clear as crystal—a hunting boat had got too far from the mother ship and was exposed to great dangers, in spite of having the harpoon with it, a weapon whose very name had a magical potency. It is doubtful whether they can reach the safety of their ship; perhaps isolation and loss awaits them. At that very moment comes a loud knock at the door of our room. I jump into the air as if a blue whale has just butted my boat, or worse still—as if the Germans have come. It is only some people coming to Mother on routine Sunday business, but I feel as if I have been torn away, ripped against my will from another world, a world I would much prefer to be in as long as possible. *End of scene.*

The volume of the *Children's Magazine* by Zhitlovsky was full of poems by Kadya Molodowsky, whom we loved, as well as various stories. Here is a fable from the Far East that I found among those pages and that I carry within

me to this day. How do I remember it in all its detail? Perhaps because of the expression on my mother's face when I first read it aloud to her.

"Once upon a time the emperor assembled all the wise men in his kingdom when he first came to power, and said, 'I wish to be a good and enlightened ruler, so I must know all that happened to mankind in the generations before me. Take parchment, therefore, and write down the story of all that has happened in my kingdom and the world, and bring it to me.' All the men of knowledge and wisdom gathered and began working seriously at the task the emperor had given them. Twenty years passed, and the chief wise man informed the emperor that their task was done. On the appointed day, a caravan appeared in the palace courtyard. At its head marched a band of wise men, and behind them trailed forty camels, each bearing on its back ten thick volumes. 'We have fulfilled your command, our Lord and Emperor,' said the chief wise man, pointing to the caravan behind him. 'For twenty years we have labored, collecting and selecting every scrap of information and knowledge ever recorded unto the generations; it is all in the books before you.' 'But I am already a man of years,' said the emperor, 'how can I read all these books when I must rule my kingdom, too? Therefore return to your place and prepare for me a new and shorter version, one I can find time to read.' The council of wise men went away and shut themselves up for five more years before returning to the palace courtyard. They were fewer this time, and their beards were long and white as snow. 'We have obeyed your command, my Lord,' said the chief wise man, who now leaned on a staff. He pointed to the camel behind him, which carried only four volumes on its back. But the emperor, now old and weak, spurned them again: 'My eyes are dim and I have not the strength to study these books. Prepare for me a shorter version which you can read to me.' Three more years went by, and a single old man entered the emperor's court with trembling legs, his body bent, and after him walked a donkey with a single thick volume on its back. In a feeble voice, the man said to the emperor: 'We have done as you commanded, our Sovereign.' But the emperor was already on his deathbed and could only reply in a whisper, 'It is now too late for me to read even a single page. Make haste, then, and tell me in a sentence or two the essence of what happened to the generations before me.' 'My Lord and Emperor,' responded the wise man, 'they were born, lived, suffered and died.' As he was finishing these words, the emperor sighed, and shut his eyes forever."

The stove went out; the lights were already off, and only the lit oil wick gave off its strong smell. An enlightened silence fell over both of us. I sensed that my mother was a partner to the sad and deep-seated truth that I had grasped

here from the mouths of far-off elders, a truth that I was in great need of those days: Listen well, my son, this is nature's law imposed on each generation, and there is no escaping it – all the people who came before you were also born, then they lived, they suffered, and they died.

I was only ten at the time, but like everyone else I sought desperately for any hope, for the end of a life-line to hang onto. And if the chances of rescue were dim, it was better to become used to the idea of death, which drew nearer and nearer with firm and certain steps, and there was no escaping it.

Street Songs

*...Dortn dortn, tif in gortn,
zitzt a tchort un shpilt mit kortn*

(Deep in a garden, far away
At cards a devil sits to play)

The longer things went on, the more lenient—so we felt—adults became toward our mischief. Their strength to rebuke and limit us dwindled. And so we ten-year-olds were drawn into the habit of singing dirty songs. More was hidden than plain in these songs, but we took a secret delight in declaiming the shady, juicy obscenities. The following is one of the tamer songs, sung to the tune of a well-known Russian *kazatchok*:

*Oyf a dekh! vakst a mer
Un oyfn mer – a tsatske,
Kum aher, du sheyne meyd,
Tantz mir a kazatske.*

*Ich hob dir gerufn,
Un du bist nit gegangen –
Itzt hob ikh anandere
Un du ver oyfgehangen.*

*Ikh oyf a shif,
Un du oyf a lotke,*

*Mir tzugezunt,
un dir di tchekhotke!*

*...Farbrent zolstu vern,
a make dir in shtern.
In shtern dir a make,
Esn zolstu khrake.
Khrake zolstu esn,
Got zol dir fargesn.
Fargesn zol dir Got,
Hengen zol men dir oyf drot.
Oyf drot zol men dir hengen,
In Yerusholayim, zum keyver-oves,
Zol men dir nit brengen.*

(On a roof grows a carrot
On the carrot is a tzatzke
Come, girl, my pretty one,
Dance me a kazatchke.

I called for you
You didn't come
I've another now
You can go hang.

A boat for you
A ship for me
I have health
And you—TB)

Fragile boats, disappointment, tuberculosis - it was dangerous to get involved with the ghetto children.

Enchanted, I sometimes walk through the orthodox neighborhoods of my city, Jerusalem, overhearing the talk of children and the scolding of mothers, hiding beyond curtained windows: all in Yiddish, nothing but Yiddish. It is

faulty and poor in vocabulary, but it is my mother tongue, the language of my childhood friends. Jerusalem is one of the few places in the country where Yiddish still spills from the mouths of young children.

Jerusalem, too, figured in our street songs:

*...Farbrent zolstu vern,
a make dir in shtern.
In shtern dir a make,
Esn zolstu khrake.
Khrake zolstu esn,
Got zol dir fargesn.
Fargesn zol dir Got,
Hengen zol men dir oyf drot.
Oyf drot zol men dir hengen,
In Yerushalayim, zum keyver—oves,
Zol men dir nit brengen.*

(May a fire consume you
A blow on your forehead
On your forehead a blow
May you eat shit,
Shit may you eat,
May God utterly forget you,
May forget you God
On wire may they hang you
May they hang you on wire.
To Jerusalem,
To the graves of our fathers,
May you never be brought!

The Tale of Ileda

One day I found myself standing by the Komität building fence and reading a notice hanging there, wrinkling my brow and trying to understand what it said. The announcement forbade residents of the ghetto, from a certain date

onward, to bring children into the world. Anyone disobeying the rule—it ended in the usual manner, the implications were always clear—would be punished with the utmost severity.

I came home and told my parents, full of wonder. They answered me noncommittally—there was nothing in their response to lessen my wonder. But the announcement and warning seemed to have an effect: babies in the ghetto became rarer, and were no longer seen outside. Parents who took chances raised their children in secret. Dr. Gurvitch told me that she helped deliver a baby girl whose parents named her Geulah, salvation. And I have read about another girl named Ghetta.

Many years later, we met a young couple in Rehovot, immigrants newly arrived from the United States. The pretty young woman had black, curly hair and brown eyes. She was full of energy, restless, constantly smoking. She worked for the Jewish Agency, welcoming immigrants at the airport, and her scientist husband studied at the Weizman Institute. I knew she was a relative of Lazer's, our neighbor in the ghetto, and so I asked her about herself. While her two children played with ours in the yard, she told her story—slowly, without enthusiasm, in marked contrast to her previous stormy lively manner. It turned out that she was one of the children born in our ghetto. Since she was born during the prohibition against bearing children, her parents, in protest, named her in Hebrew and called her Ileda, "No-birth." They had her smuggled out of the ghetto as a baby, and they themselves later perished. Had it not been for a relative who sought her out, Ileda would probably lead to this day a peaceful and quiet life as a Lithuanian in all respects, in spite of her dark hair.

Fate ordered it otherwise. She was taken to the United States and adopted by Lazer; there she lived a moderately affluent life, and was now here in Israel. I felt close to her, the warmth of a partner in fate. Does your special name not embarrass you, I asked. No, she smiled, the name sounds exotic, and people simply accept it without asking questions. Are you happy now, Ileda? In the sadness of her shining eyes and her obvious restlessness, I discerned her discomfort. Some time after we met, we were informed that the young couple had decided to return to the United States. They had sent their children on before them, while they, somewhere between Athens and Rome, plummeted

like a rock into the deep waters with their plane, which had exploded in the air.. The curse of her untimely birth caught up with Ileda thirty years later through a terrorist's bomb.

Photographs

Sunday morning, beside the large apartment blocks. I am leaving the bakery, holding a pot. For some time now, we have known that on weekends we can bring a pot of "cholent" to the Komität bread-baking oven. At the request of us children, Mother tried her hand at the dish too. In the pot she placed beans, frost-bitten potatoes, some fat, a marrow bone of beef- if she could get one - a little brown sugar, a garlic clove, and other items of one kind or another. She would wrap the pot in an old piece of newspaper folded in two, tie it tightly with a strip of cloth from a worn-out sheet, and write our name on top with a special chemist's pencil" . I would take the pot to the bakery. Mother was not overly-enthusiastic about making this dish, partly because of the difficulty in collecting ingredients that would make the dish resemble real cholent, and partly because of the need to prepare everything in advance on weekdays while she was at work. The pot had to be brought to the baker on the preceding evening, and he would place it deep inside the hot oven. On Sunday—the day of rest, before noon, I would return to take the hot cholent home. I was always amazed at how brittle and brown the white paper had turned overnight, and how the pot had changed its appearance, color and smell. I was pleased this time that I had managed to spot our pot so easily. Although I would always engrave in my memory the pots near which our own cholent was placed, I could never be sure it would be there the next day - such things had happened. After stepping outdoors with the ready pot, I hung around the bakery with some of the other children. An unknown man with a mysterious expression approached, and asked me to step aside with him. There he requested me to stand for a moment holding the pot of cholent while he photographed me.

The cholent gave off its delicious aroma through the brown paper. Snow lay on the ground and I smiled in mischievous embarrassment at the camera lens. When he had finished, he made me swear that I would tell no one about the photograph.

I understood that this was an act of secret documentation, and so I neither asked unnecessary questions nor attached any special importance to the photograph—until an exhibition of a photographer from our ghetto was put on at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, a man named Kadushin (Kadish). He had persistently endangered himself in his attempts to immortalize life in the ghetto, and his photographs had miraculously survived. It occurred to me that he must be the man who took my picture. With excitement, we drove, Miriam and I, to look at the photographs. Many were the pictures that spoke to me—brigades setting off for work; the gates and policemen of the ghetto; crowds of people gathering. Even though I never found my photo, my heart stopped over one innocent, seemingly ordinary photograph: an alley closed off by the fence, with little girls playing there. How my heart caught—perhaps it was the alley beside our first house before the first big Aktion, in Strazdeliu Street, and perhaps my little sister is there among the girls crossing the street at a run? I decided then that I wanted to come back one day and ask to see the rest of the photographs in the archives.

Several years passed before I arranged with my friend Rina to go and actually went to the Diaspora Museum. In silence we combed through the albums brought to us, and we seemed to be thrust back through a time tunnel—dozens and dozens of ghetto photographs. In entrances, on the way to work, at tables, or in cultural assemblies, so many faces—smiling faces, lively faces, eyes bright and trusting; people I didn't know from our ghetto looked at us with piercing gazes, like the matrons in Yosel Bergner's paintings. Ostensibly strangers, nevertheless I felt immensely close to them. I suddenly froze—perhaps my mother was in one of these photographs, and I haven't recognized her? Interesting, Rina says dryly as we leave—I thought the same thing.

No, neither of us found anyone we knew there. Not even a ten-year-old boy standing between the two apartment blocks, holding a pot of cholent with both hands. But I ordered a copy of a photograph showing children sliding in the snow—one of them might be me.

The collection of photographs remained behind like a pile of unidentified bodies, and they call after us: don't leave us alone, give us a name.

The River

In all of this, like an eternal refrain, so close and so unattainable, the river never stopped flowing, silent and free, toward the great ocean somewhere far in the west.

Usually, we children never saw it. I suppose it would have been possible to sneak beyond the cemetery or the workshops to slightly higher areas near the embankments and view it, or to the mound near Democrats' Square, where a German guard was now stationed beside the gate leading to the river. From other vantage points one could look far to the west and see the remains of the great bridge that led to the city, collapsed since the beginning of the war. Beside it stretched a military pontoon bridge over which the Germans moved heavy vehicles and the brigades marched on their way to work. Leisure boats no longer sailed there, and lumber barges were also rare. But in the ghetto, Mother could still make me laugh by declaiming from a poem by Moshe Kulbak, one of her favorite poets, the calls of the Jewish boatmen from bygone days:

Shmulye, hey Shmulye,

farpach dem hintn oyf Skarulye!

(Hey Shmulye ,

whip your heinie towards Skarulye)

During the second year, some work brigades began crossing the river by boat, morning and evening, straight from the ghetto to their work sites on the other side. Piltz-Fabrik brigade was one of these. Work in the felt-boot factory was exhausting and wearing. With bare hands the women had to knead the clumps of felt, softening and preparing them for washing, so they could be fashioned into boots for German soldiers at the front. Working in the great humidity was, for Mother with her rheumatism, like being stabbed with a knife every day anew. Yet this work place made possible constant contact with Lithuanians, particularly women. During the day they could cut bargains and barter almost without supervision. It was not for nothing that many tried to join this brigade. The head of the brigade was Dr. Greenberg, a decent man, an X-ray specialist. He excelled at getting along with the Germans and meeting their demands while still safeguarding his people as much as

possible. Mother joined the brigade by chance, as a substitute worker, and having seen its advantages, clung to her place with all her might, and never let go.

Control over the gates leading from the factory to the river was perfunctory, which made smuggling a little easier. From time to time, however, for their own reasons and without advance warning, the Germans would cancel the boat transports, rerouting the brigades through the main gate, catching people by surprise and subjecting them to more rigorous inspections and confiscation, which often resulted in overnight detention in jail, if not worse.

Beyond the closed door I hear the muffled sounds of Miriam's last-minute preparations for her early start to work. Just so I would feel at dawn, listening to Mother's movements from behind closed eyes as she left for her daily work. Both leave notes, a few words, a hot dish in a pan. And sometimes even today I feel a sudden, inexplicable longing—when will Mother return? At the end of her exhausting day, Mother would tell me how her crossing went, and I would envy her her daily encounter with the river, with the banks and sights beyond them, almost as in days long since gone.

In the exhibition of Kadish's photographs, I was surprised to see a photo of women and children in our ghetto bathing in the river. It turns out that for a short period, probably during the second summer, the Germans allowed it, and I never knew about it. I remember the two of us, my sister and I, together in a tin tub placed on stools, with Mother ladling water heated on the range.

In the photographs I was also surprised by the shrunken dimensions of the river, the embarrassing proximity of the opposite bank, as captured by Kadish's Leica camera. I prefer to remember the sights through a child's eye: a river large and wide, with the Green Hill rising high on the other side.

Ghetto Songs, Choir and Orchestra

The ghetto sang songs. As soon as people recovered from the first shock, ghetto songs spread. They were based on familiar tunes to which new words were fitted, and were passed contagiously from one person to another. They

sang about everything, missing not a single aspect of the new reality. The descriptions were sometimes naive and sentimental, sometimes bitter laments, but they were also humorous and hopeful for better times, too. They were a kind of underground communication for a persecuted community trying to keep its courage up. As children do, we were among the first to memorize the words, copying them diligently onto any half-used page. These in turn became yet more items in our endless barter and exchange. Many songs can be found in various anthologies. One that speaks to me especially deals with the march of the work brigades; its melody is always with me:

Yidishe Brigades

*A naye tzayt far unz gekumen,
A tzayt fun yomer, noyt un pain;
Avek fun unz di zun, di blumen –
geblibn nor der arbets-shein.*

Refrain:

*Yidishe brigades,
oysgeputzt in lates,
marshirn tog-ayn, tog-oys -
un haltn di tzores mutik oys!*

(Yiddish Brigades

*A new time is come upon us
A time of weeping, want, and pain
The sun is gone, the flowers faded,
And all that's left is a work permit.*

Refrain:

*Jewish brigades, Jewish brigades
All adorned with patch on patch
Marching, marching, day by day
Bravely bearing sorrow.)*

(First verse of "Yiddishe Brigades" by A. Axelrod).

And there was a choir, with four voices. Choir members were both children and adults, and rehearsals were held in the attic of the central apartment

block, which served as the meeting place for various public bodies. How I came to join I do not recall, but I was proud to belong to it. We sang in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Lithuanian, and the songs and melodies we sang then accompany me to this day.

We appeared in public several times, for certain holidays and special events. The biggest performance I remember took place in the formerly famous Yeshiva building, which had been made the center of the ghetto's cultural life. Before the event, the house was cleaned and reclaimed, having been used first as a temporary storage place for the confiscated books, and later as the collection point for concentrating and destroying the ghetto's dogs and cats. On the raised dais of the synagogue we stood, dressed in our best clothes, arranged in rows by height and voice; in front of us was our conductor, Boris Gerber, who had an artificial left arm. All his life, Gerber had presided over the choir of the large synagogue in our city; now, he had to make do with much less. In spite of the special circumstances, the man kept up an optimistic front, and with a wave of his hand succeeded in banishing—if only for a short while—the shadows of current events. I was in the alto section, second row, first from the left. The audience this time was very special—it included the ghetto dignitaries, its leaders and captains, as well as several German officers who had deigned to accept an invitation and boost the morale of the ghetto residents—the chief hunters come to hear the song of the deer.

It was clear to me that the audience was looking only at me, not at the soloists and not at the conductor. I sang, full of self-importance, enunciating clearly with mouth and lips, standing straight and tall, as Father had always instructed me to do. We sang "There in the Glorious Land, in Our Brethren's Dwellings," to an effusive tune whose source, I was told many years later, was a song of praise in Lithuanian for their Sheshupe River. With sadness, we sang about Tel Hai, in the Galilee, where the national hero Trumpeldor fell, and with enthusiasm, "Hallelujah" and "Wake, Wake, O Israel." We dared also sing

—"Rage and revel, ye winds of winter, this is your day." We finished our repertoire, to a great deal of applause, with humorous songs, such as "Spuds on Sunday, Spuds on Monday," and others.

One day, not long ago I met a radio personality who is many years older than I, a native of my city who had come to Israel in his youth. While talking about this and that, we found ourselves, to my surprise, recalling these same songs. He too had learned them from the same Boris Gerber, long before the war. I found it strange to realize that the heroes of my memory had a life before the ghetto. Gerber himself, however, was later seen in the concentration camps, from where he never returned.

I often see an enlarged photograph of the Yeshiva building in all its glory on the wall of a friend's house. She is very proud of it, for it was there that her deceased father had studied in his youth; she found the picture among his belongings. I for one am never happy to see it.

Both with and without the choir, a string orchestra also staged concerts, bearing the name of its conductor, the violinist Misha Hoffmekler. This was practically the first orchestra I ever listened to, not counting the orchestral accompaniment in the operas I saw with Mother before the war. Sometimes they played chamber music in smaller ensembles. I heard that, later, the remnants of this orchestra greeted newcomers at Dachau. After the war, Hoffmekler's daughter was one of the sobbing toddlers in our orphanage.

Love

Sunday afternoon, the weekly day of rest, further up Grinius Street nearby. After having worked at home all morning, Mother and I go out for a short walk. Among the other strollers out at the time, a young couple is walking ahead of us, embracing and holding hands, covering one another with furtive kisses. Absentmindedly, they step around the many children playing in the streets, ignoring the stares of people leaning in doorways. They are in no hurry; he seems to be walking her home. In this direction, their stroll will not last long—the end of the street is fenced; they are trying to prolong their moments together as much as possible.

And the two of us, Mother and I, like an experienced elderly couple, walk behind them, exchanging wise glances: a couple in love.

When they reach the house, right next to the fence, they linger at the entrance and embrace one another. So much left to say! And when she finally

pulls away and turns to go inside, he remains standing for a long time, watching her receding steps, lost in thought.

Sunday afternoon, further up Grinius Street.

At times, when I hear "Reizele" by Gebirtig (just as the singing of Emma Schaver captured my heart, much later) describing the footsteps of the beloved on the staircase after she departs, I remember this anonymous young couple that we saw one Sunday afternoon in our ghetto. How long did they have to love one another, what became of them?

Fury

For one reason or another, I happened to be on the second floor of the Komit t building, the heart and nervous system of the ghetto. A long hallway, lined with doors to offices. From here the decrees dictated by the Germans was issued, here all requests and appeals was referred.

Suddenly, an elderly grey-haired man bursts shouting from one of the rooms, followed by his wife. Flushed with fury, he slams the door behind him with such force that the whole floor shakes and shudders, and, in a rage, he roars along the corridor, "And these people wanted to found a state!"

Years have passed, and that shout still haunts me.

Study Groups

Study groups met in secret. They were started, with the tacit approval of the Komit t, by parents and teachers who took it upon themselves to renew studies in place of the schools, closed by order of the Germans. Lessons were held several mornings a week in various homes, and pupils were placed in them according to their level of knowledge and their preferred language of instruction, Yiddish or Hebrew. Now Mother no longer objected to my studying in Hebrew, maybe because the study group in this language was held close to our home, in Arke and Maimke's flat. On a regular day, we had three or four lessons, with recesses of about fifteen minutes to allow teachers time to arrive from their previous classes. I know neither who was responsible for the overall coordination of the classes—probably Dr. Chaim-Nahman Shapiro—nor the number of courses offered throughout the ghetto, but the system functioned with great efficiency for nearly two years.

Through the windows of Arke and Maimke's flat on the second floor, one could see relatively far, and we were able to follow the entertaining sight of our next teacher making his way through the sown fields, taking a shortcut to our place of study. We were thus able to keep up our play until the very last moment, when the teacher would arrive and take off his coat.

Our group consisted of six or eight pupils of about the same age, seated around a big dining table. Most of us had once studied together in the lower grades of the Hebrew gymnasium. Here was Mishka Kapulsky, in whose grandfather's flat we had sought refuge on the first day of the war, as well as brown-skinned Abrashka Klavansky, whom we called "Tziganer" (Gypsy) for that reason. Abrashka, the only one from this study group besides myself who survived, is now a dentist in Chicago. When we met recently, he recalled several other children who studied with us, including a girl or two. One day Abrashka happened to be in Israel, and Danke brought him along to my wedding, which took place on that very day—and it was a very unique experience for me. Kagan, too, was at the wedding ceremony, and that was also very important to me. But in order to tell who Kagan is and why I went out of my way especially to invite him, I would have to skip two years of my story. Would that I could have made such a skip in real life.

We had two main teachers in our group—Vetrin, formerly our teacher in the first and second grades—and Kapit, who taught mathematics and geometry. Vetrin had been co-author with my father in *The Hebrew Primer*. It was he who had taught us to read and write in Hebrew. I always marveled at his ability to draw large square letters, with colored bi-dimensional shading. Now our paths crossed again for a while. He probably taught us Bible, literature, and grammar. Kapit had written many well-known textbooks in mathematics. His face was as angular and precise as the laws of his discipline, but his manner with students was correct and amiable. He always wore high black shoes with a pull-on strap attached to their backs. It was he who took me aside one day and, as if whispering a secret and with the discomfort of a man of intellect being forced to deal with material matters, asked me to inform my mother that as the child of a teacher I was exempt - like Arke and Maimke from payment of a loaf of bread, the weekly fee.

On one morning when we were having our lessons something happened which cannot quite be defined as an educational issue – Mek's hanging, and so the event is intertwined in my memory with our lessons on the major prophets. This was the first time a gallows had been erected in the ghetto, and from Ruchama's flat we half-looked, half-avoided looking at the terrifying sight. From the moment the hammer blows reached our ears, it was impossible to concentrate on our studies. The gallows was erected in an empty lot next to the Komitāt building, near our house, and all the residents of the ghetto who were there at the time were ordered to come and watch the hanging.

We already knew the main points of the case: a few days before, in the evening, a sentry had tried to stop someone seen slipping through the fence; the person had drawn a pistol and fired. This had happened near the main, western gate, near that section of the fence facing the river.

The German was unharmed, but Mek was apprehended. His accomplice, who at the time was crawling under the fence, managed to slither back and disappear safely in the ghetto. A wave of anxiety spread through the entire ghetto, the public held its breath—a Jew brandishing a gun and firing at a German would certainly not pass unnoticed! And although he was questioned with blows and torture for several days, Mek never gave his friend away. The two of them turned out to be a pair of petty smugglers on their way, with no combative intentions, to trade jewelry with Lithuanians. Perhaps for this reason the Germans had decided, to the ghetto's good fortune, not to impose a collective punishment on the entire community, and were content to sentence Mek to public hanging inside the ghetto at the hands of the Jewish police, so that all would see and be afraid.

Where did they find such thick trees, and how did the builders know the dimensions and shape of a gallows tree? I had seen the like in Father's history books. We couldn't see many details from the flat's windows, but we were able to make out the rope dangling down, and the wooden platform. Were they indeed about to hang a man there, in full view of the public? And already there were those among us who could explain how the rope would jerk up and choke the hanged man, while others claimed that the floor would open its mouth

and the man's neck would be broken in an instant. One way or another, it was clear that our next lesson would be an extraordinary one.

By eleven o'clock, the lot was full of people. A limousine full of Germans arrived, then another; chairs were set up for the viewers as if for a play or a choir concert. From out of nowhere the doomed man suddenly appeared and was escorted to the platform. From Ruchama's windows we could see how short he was, how wretched his appearance. With his hands bound, he was led forward, tottering like a drunkard, lost, wandering. People later said that he was nearly out of his mind at the time from being beaten and tortured. All the same, they added, he seemed quiet and restrained, acted with dignity, managed to whisper a word of pardon to the Jewish policemen surrounding him; and some even claimed they heard "Shema Israel"—"Hear, Israel"—escaping his lips before he was hoisted up and silenced.

From our window we could not see all the details of the episode. One instant, we saw a diminutive figure standing on the platform under the beam of the gallows with his hands behind his back; the next, as soon as we opened our eyes again, the same figure was now swinging on the rope high above the gathered people. Nothing seemed to change—his head, which had already been bowed, now seemed to tilt somewhat more to the side, and the body seemed somehow superfluous, spinning in circles at the end of the rope like a scarecrow in a garden, in puzzled search of something left on the ground behind it.

That was that; thus people die. So simply. All was quiet. No voice called out, no crying was heard. Only a German officer made a short cautionary speech. The Jewish policemen stood at attention, and the German cars began to leave. The crowd dispersed slowly. But we could not return to our studies.

Mek's body was ordered to be left hanging for twenty-four hours, and policemen were left to guard it. Were the Germans unsure that his soul had indeed departed? That afternoon, a few of us came to take a look at the hanging body, approaching as near as we dared. I myself was content to stand looking on from a greater distance. Whether because of the piercing November cold, or the blowing winds, Mek's body continued to spin endlessly around on the rope, its legs kicking lightly in the air, as if this additional

penalty had been imposed on him, and he had not yet grown weary of paying it. During the coming hours his already small body seemed to shrink even further.

That night I found it hard to sleep, thinking about the corpse there outside, at that very moment being covered with thin white frost, gleaming in the distance, its head tilted slightly to one side. Was he really feeling nothing any more, as Mother explained—was he really there no longer?

The next day, exactly twenty-four hours later, his body was lowered and taken to the cemetery. By the time I got there, the gallows had just been taken down, as if it had been the backdrop for a theater production now leaving for another show elsewhere. The Jewish policemen were quarreling playfully over the hanging rope, which had been cut into pieces. I was told such scraps were considered lucky. From what I know today of the fate of our ghetto policemen, I am in a position to cast some doubt on the magic power of those pieces of rope.

Mek was buried without a funeral or eulogy. He was denied even a tombstone. Yet several days later a small sign appeared in the mound, with a single word on it—Mek.

On the day of his burial, the Gestapo came to his flat and took his mother and sister to the Ninth Fort. The study groups continued for nearly another year. Thanks to them, thanks to our teachers' quiet toil, I can call this period of a year and a half, however inaccurately, the "quiet period."

Stamps

Just small pieces of paper, after all, but how they occupy my mind!

One day I will write to the previous ruler of the Soviet Union (I've been thinking about this for many years). Mikhael Sergeivitsch —I will begin—you who opened up your great country, as well as the hearts of its people, both to one another and to the whole world, please lend your ear now to the modest request of a former child: command, please, that his album of ghetto stamps be returned.

This is how it happened.

There were various offices in the ghetto, and each had its own rubber stamp. Oblong, round, triangular—even under the harsh ghetto conditions, there was

no difficulty in producing varied rubber stamps. Children took up collecting the marks made by these stamps, competing fiercely. Some stamps were easy to get hold of—an official document past its expiration date, the torn corner of a stamped certificate—and others were rare and much harder to obtain. Some of us did not disdain rummaging through the rubbish outside the Komitāt building, and some were even bolder and would circulate through the various offices asking for a piece of paper to be stamped. Some clerks obliged with a smile; others were mean and stingy. Naturally, it was precisely the stamps controlled by the scowlers that had a higher value on the exchange market. Special value accrued to stamps that were valid only for short periods of time, or those that had indubitably legal validity.

Police stamps belonged to the latter category. They were diamond-shaped, with rounded corners, and inside were inscribed words of great magical power:

*JGP -
Jüdische
Ghetto
Polizei*

My fingers would tremble when I succeeded in obtaining some part of a certificate with this stamp on it to paste into my collection—at times this stamp brought tidings of life or death. I felt as if I were handling an amulet of inestimable value.

Full of enthusiasm, I never ceased asking and searching among our friends and acquaintances for someone who was likely to have access to a rare stamp. By chance, my mother found out that Hannah, the modest and gentle wife of Rabbi Snyeg, formerly the chief military rabbi, had a special treasure—she had the stamp of the school, which had closed a year before, having been the school secretary. Mrs. Snyeg agreed that we should come to her house one day and obtain samples of this rare and precious stamp. In those days, my mother and Hannah were still on good terms. Mother was handling negotiations for the sale of Hannah's fur coat to some Lithuanians in the city. I do not remember the details of the deal, but it ended with much anger between the two, a rift that was still unhealed when the end came. So thoroughly did I empathize with Mother in her anger that years later, when I

arrived in the course of my subsequent wanderings in Munich, where Rabbi Snyeg was officiating as the chief Rabbi of the survivors (and his wife Hannah had not returned from the camps), I refused to greet him.

At any rate, one Sunday evening, after many repeated postponements, Mother and I walked to the Sniyegs in the large apartment blocks. We found Hanna in a dim flat on the second floor. It was full of furniture, sacred books, and pictures of great rabbis. She smiled when she greeted us, asked us to wait a bit, and went into an interior bedroom. She stayed there so long that I began to fear that she didn't have the stamp after all. But she returned, stamp in hand. Mother immediately came to my aid, having prepared suitable pieces of paper in advance, and obtained several samples of the precious stamp. I walked out dizzy, feeling like a millionaire.

And like the owner of the million-dollar banknote in Mark Twain's story, I had no end of trouble because of the very rarity of the stamp. At first my friends doubted its authenticity, and when they were finally persuaded, it was hard to trade—its value was too high. Exchanges could include rubber stamp impressions, postage stamps, coins, or brass buttons; all were currencies in our market. In the end I managed to exchange most of my precious stamp stock, and thanks to it I accumulated a respectable collection of which I was immensely proud. I arranged the stamps in an album made of cardboard pages, which opened lengthwise; it had a greenish cover made of heavier cardboard. Over time, the cover proved its worth. I pasted the stamps down by applying strips of paper over their edges, holding the strips down using a flour-and-water paste, arranged in order of the Komitāt offices, in rows and columns like postage stamps, even though the bits of paper were of different sizes.

Like me, the album survived the war in a unique way. During the last stage of the ghetto, Mother began soberly preparing for evacuation. She placed various family documents in a washtub, which we buried in the ground, and, in answer to my entreaties, she added my album of stamps, which she put at the bottom of the tub—although it was hard for me to part with it even temporarily. Did I take the act seriously? Some time later, I repeated the ceremony in another yard further up Grinius Street, near the fence, together with my tall friend, as a children's game. We made a shallow pit, strengthened with bricks,

and inside it we placed a children's toy—a tin zeppelin, in whose elongated cavity we inserted a note with both our names.

What happened, happened, and the ghetto was consumed by fire. When I returned after the war, I cleaned away the dust and ashes, and discovered the washtub where I thought we had left it. I took off the cover, only to discover—most of its contents were baked and charred, looking much like the paper that covered the pot of tcholent I used to bring home from the bakery. But I dug inside the brown container and found, the deeper I went, papers that were less and less damaged. And there, below the many brown or singed documents, lay, incredibly, my album of stamps in all its light greenish glory, whole and sound as on the day I placed it there, light years ago. I also found, of all my toys, none other than the tin zeppelin, but that is another story.

Later, when I tried to cross the border of the Soviet Union—I may get to tell that story some day, too—the album of stamps was one of the few things I took with me as I prepared to be smuggled out. That story did not end so well, and the album, having survived the trials of fire and ash, fell into the hands of my captors, and it probably remains in the vaults of the K.G.B. to this very day.

Is it only for the loss of the stamps that I continue to grieve? When I rescued the album from its hiding place and browsed through its pages, I found a surprise. On the back side of one of the scraps of paper I came across a few lines in my mother's hand: "Children, there's soup in the pot. Heat it at noon with the porridge. Hearty Appetite. Mother." A short, ordinary note, one of Mother's daily messages, scrawled in haste on the back of an item in my collection.

The OGG

It was all a matter of four summers: the war started in the first summer and ended in the last. Between them were two full summers in the ghetto. And during those summers, there was also the "Irgun Shomrim Laginot". let's call it "the Order of Garden Guards," or OGG for short.

Already during the spring before the first summer in the ghetto, the authorities decided to make the ghetto population supplement their food by growing their own vegetables. Seeds were distributed, and everyone was ordered to

cultivate vegetables in their gardens. That summer the program failed, both because people did not take to it, and because many didn't know how to go about it. By the following summer, an effort of strict enforcement was made. Police inspection patrols, accompanied by Germans, made rounds during the day through the houses, driving out everyone they found indoors to work their gardens. We were once surprised during our Bible lesson by a fat, well-known sergeant-major, and we scattered in all directions like frightened chicks. It was a cat-and-mouse game with very little practical purpose, although in the end a few vegetables did grow in front of our house.

The wide fields in the empty lots between houses at the edge of the ghetto were a different matter. These were prepared and sown by authority of the Komit t, and the ghetto police was responsible for guarding them from damage and theft. Then someone had the idea of using children as guards, thereby also providing the youngsters with an educational framework of some sort.

The OGG gradually recruited adolescents and began giving them guard duties. The response was enthusiastic and many joined up. The activity aroused much envy among us younger children, since at first we were refused admission into the order. By the following summer, the scope of the OGG had grown, and so had we. The next summer (the third summer in the ghetto)—I was approaching the age of ten—I too applied, encouraged by friends who had already been accepted, and to my joy, I was not rejected this time—I was signed up as a candidate. A young guide, sixteen or seventeen years old, interviewed me, tested my knowledge on various subjects, including Hebrew and Lithuanian, the Order's official languages, examined my physical ability to perform various exercises, and enrolled me in a group to which I would henceforth belong.

First, before we could be certified for our jobs, we had to undergo preparation and training. We met regularly to practice drills, roll call, and marching in line. Sometimes the meeting was more theoretical; literature was read to us to us and the Rule of the Loyal Guard was recited. After several weeks of preparation, which we completed with much solemnity, the guide tested our knowledge, and we were ready for certification. At the initiation ceremony, we were each issued a white linen sailor's hat—the guard's cap. On its left-hand

front corner, where the insignia appear, was a triangular purple stamp with the characters "O.G.G." in Hebrew. This cap, our crowning pride, was to be worn while on duty, and only then. Any transgression would result first and foremost in returning the cap to the Order.

With fear and trembling, with emotion and anticipation, I looked forward to the day when I would first set out to perform the important task—guarding the gardens. Thus we went forth: the group on duty met at the appointed hour at headquarters near the apartment blocks; after roll call and a few drills, a column of guards marched out, eight or ten children headed by a guide, with a glorious left-right step and energetic arm swing, through the streets of the ghetto to the fields. When we reached the section under our authority, a precise changing-of-the-guards ceremony was performed between the outgoing and incoming guards: the new group approached the guard about to be replaced and stood to attention. While the rest of the company kept marching, the first in line of the replaced group came to a halt opposite the leader of the new group. The two exchanged salutes, salutations, and other necessary information, and the retired guard hurried to catch up with the end of the retreating column, which marched in the meantime to the next point of exchange. Years later I chanced, as a tourist, to be in front of the royal palace in Athens—or perhaps it was London—and at the sight of the Changing of the Guards a wondrous ancient riddle was solved—where the young OGG guides had found the model of their precise ceremony.

Around every vegetable plot, three or four guards were stationed for a watch lasting three or four hours. Watches were in daylight hours only, since at night there was a general curfew in the ghetto anyway. We were stationed in different sections each time, perhaps to vary the routine. A few policemen served alongside us, each responsible for several plots. We were to turn to them with any question or problem. They also kept guard there themselves during the early hours of the morning and towards evening.

During our watch, we had to march around the edge of our plot, ensuring that no one approached it or stole its crop—potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbage, beets, and more. What were we to do in case of theft? Alert the policemen nearby, perhaps with a whistle or a shout. In addition, we were forbidden to speak to friends or passersby, lay hands upon the fruit of the

field, abandon our post before our shift came to an end; we also had to show up for all prescribed duties. Any transgressor of these laws paid a single penalty—expulsion from the order.

What the poor ghetto residents thought of us when they saw us passing along with our silly goose-step, or when we accosted them to keep them off the edge of the plot, one can only guess. Jeers and insults, which I endured more than once while standing guard, made no impression on me—I was proud to be relied upon, to be entrusted with responsibility.

The OGG got me out of the house, and out of the first bloom of youth into a new, more mature world. I was entranced by the hierarchies, the orders, the discipline. I felt satisfaction at belonging to an organization that had strength and power.

Some visual evidence of this period remains—sketches by two artists who were with us in the ghetto. Esther Luria, a painter from Palestine, whose lot was thrown in with ours at the start of the war, managed to survive and rescue her drawings by hiding them among Lithuanians. In her published album, I rediscovered the wooden bridge leading to the Little Ghetto, the final march to the Ninth Fort, and, among her sketches, children of the OGG holding bunches of vegetables, as well as a little girl with the OGG sailor's cap on her curly head. Ya'akov Lifshitz, our family's friend, who perished, left behind several sketches, one showing three OGG guards wearing their sailors' caps and standing in a field. As in Esther Luria's drawings, the children in Lifshitz's sketches seem pensive little adults. The middle one is short and stout. If he didn't look so young, I mused, it would be the portrait of my good friend Arke. Two things, seemingly unrelated, combined to bring an end to my OGG activity. As the second summer season of vegetable growing came to an end, the effects of routine became apparent in the performance of guard duty. We seem to have become tired. Care was no longer taken to rotate us among the fields, and the punctilious changing-of-the-guard at the edge of the field stopped—the framework became looser and looser. Again and again I found myself guarding the same cucumber plot opposite the workshops. This was convenient for me, because here the plots were large and fairly remote from people. Thus there was a chance for a little mischief and even a little furtive

book reading. Moreover, like others, I began committing the sin of the unmuzzled ox, tasting the juicy fruit of the garden we were guarding.

In these larger fields, children and policemen guarded together, and occasionally an officer would arrive for inspection. One day towards evening when I was on duty, after the officer had finished his inspection and walked away, I noticed him, to my surprise, return and enter the field from the other side, bend over, and gather vegetables, which went into his backpack. Agitated, I called this to the attention of the policeman beside me—but he showed no particular interest. For several days I was troubled by a feeling of unease. Should I report it, or pretend that nothing had happened? After thinking it over, I reported at headquarters what I had seen. In the command station I was praised for my alertness, but this brought no relief—reporting an officer of the police, a representative of ghetto authority, was no small matter—who knew where it would end? Several days passed, and with some relief I thought the matter had been forgotten. But one day I was invited to police headquarters near the apartment blocks. With trembling knees I entered the investigator's office. A sheet of white paper lay on his desk, and he began, in an amiable but serious tone, to read out the details of my complaint and question me about it. Again I described the details of the incident, and he diligently wrote down everything I said. Was I certain of the man's identity? Was it perhaps someone else who entered the field from the other side—how could I be sure it was the officer? He was obviously taking the investigation very seriously, even though it was a ten-year-old child sitting opposite him. Although I insisted, and kept to my story, I began gradually to feel as though I myself were being accused in this incident. At the end of the inquiry, he read to me, as was customary, the protocol written in Lithuanian, had me sign the report, and remarked that indeed, my testimony implied a serious accusation. The man would most likely stand to trial, and I must be ready to bear witness. Heavyhearted, I went home, worrying even more than before that I had overdone it this time, that I had taken the matter too far.

During the following days I waited with much suspense for the summons to the court. The summons failed to arrive, and I continued in the meantime to guard the same plot. Now I began noticing that the policemen around me, not only that officer, were themselves not content with tasting the fruit, but were

also concealing some of it in their bags—it was impossible to separate the guarding network from the sad reality of the starving ghetto: Sin is contagious—and over the next few days I, too, at first with much embarrassment, began bringing the fruit of the field home. Mother asked no questions. She thought the cucumbers were being distributed to us at the end of each shift—so she later explained. As a result, the urge to take grew ever stronger, until one day I decided to imitate someone—whom we had once caught red-handed—and brought along a cloth bag that we had at home. I remember the bag well—it had white and orange alternating stripes, and white cloth handles; in former days, we had used it for outings on the riverbank at summer camp. Now I hung it by its handles from my trouser belt beneath my long coat. During my shift, whenever I found myself removed some distance from the policeman with me, I would bend down and furtively place a few vegetables in it.

It was the last days of autumn. The policeman on duty with me was amiable and kind. Twilight descending early made it easier for me to add another piece of fruit to the bag, and another, and yet another. I was so satisfied with my initiative that I must have overdone it with the number of cucumbers I took. The bitter result was that, at the end of my watch as I was leaving the field, my cumbersome gait raised the policeman's suspicions, and he called for me to return. What have you got there, child? He ordered me to undo my coat buttons—and I stood there exposed.

My shame—my disgrace—my embarrassment knew no bounds. The policeman paid no heed to my excuse that this was the first and only time I had ever done such a thing. He confiscated my bulging bag and sent me home, but not before preaching me a sermon—the shame of it! - for betraying my duty and the trust that they had placed in me.

My return from the fields, all along Grinius Street from the river to my home, was very long this time, and paved with bitter weeping. I was beside myself. I had wanted so much to be a "provider", a partner in feeding the family, deserving of my parents' praise. How could I tell Mother now? How could I show my face among my friends in the street? And most of all—what would they say of me at headquarters, what shame, what disgrace! I would certainly stand trial; I would be denounced in public. Great darkness descended upon

me. Only once before this during my short life had I been in such a disgraceful situation, unpardonable and unatoned—an incident one Shabbat, when I hung on the back of the Gentile's carriage in the square at my grandfather the Rabbi's shtetl.

My path brought me home none the less; and this time, against all hope, Mother had returned early from her brigade, not having been delayed long at the gate. Choking with tears, I told her some of what had happened, and what I left out she no doubt understood. To my relief, she did not scold me outright for my misdeed, and tried to calm me. She even promised to go to the police and attempt to retrieve the confiscated bag.

For a few days I didn't leave the house. I was sure that I was facing a probing investigation and expulsion from the Order, if not worse. Then I remembered, to my dismay, that I was still waiting for the summons to testify at the officer's trial. How could I look the judges in the face, with the same transgression on my hands? I had done exactly as he had done; my wretchedness knew no bounds.

Another day or two passed, and nothing happened. Cautiously, I began appearing among people. The sun shone as before, and the brigades continued to leave for work at dawn. With much embarrassment, I met one of the OGG veterans; he greeted me and innocently asked why I was no longer coming to stand guard; had I been ill? And thus I discovered, to my surprise, that nothing had been reported of me, that they knew nothing at all of what had happened. Nevertheless, I decided I was never going back to the OGG.

And the officer's trial? Within a few days, the little *Aktion* occurred. Once again everything was shaken up and destroyed, and nothing ever became as it had been. When several days had gone by and no summons from the court arrived, I understood—with childish relief—that there would be no more dealings with officers who had stolen cucumbers.

And thus ended the episode of my participation in the OGG; the OGG itself came to an end, and the "quiet period" was sealed.

Another Fall and Winter

Clouds

Mother Doesn't Come Home

One day Mother did not come home from work. The stream of returning workers at twilight dispersed into the streets and disappeared into houses, and Mother wasn't among them. At the time, mothers had to work four or five days a week, and we were on our own most of the day. But even when she did return, /worn and weary, she would sometimes be further delayed, stopping here and there to barter. After a long time, another worker from the same brigade came and gave us a message from mother not to worry—she would be back later that night or, at the very latest, the next morning. She had been stopped at the gate and put in detention.

Immediately I took my sister's hand, and we went to look for her. We may have been encouraged to do so by the people around us, as a means of pleading with the ghetto police. We may also have stopped on the way at Izzia and Shulamit's house to tell them what had happened. Actually I am not sure that we even reached the gate that evening; I don't remember much of the following twelve hours. Maybe it all happened the following morning—for the curfew on the ghetto began at nightfall, and how could we have gone to the gate and back?

Yet I have a dim picture of two small children holding one another's hands and standing beside the jail near the main gate of the ghetto. It was a two-story stone house on a corner; behind it was a yard with a gate at the back. Along the inner walls were long balconies overlooked by small latticed windows, and from one of them we thought we noticed the wave of a handkerchief or a weak cry.

Years before this, we had all accompanied Father one afternoon to the university library where he was working on his master's thesis on the Spanish Inquisition. Father disappeared into the huge building, which housed the fire-fighting station. We stayed outside, watching. A few minutes later, we saw

him waving to us through the wide window, way up on the third floor, surrounded by books on the left and the right.

But now Father was far, far away, and we two children were alone beside the locked gate, trying to locate our mother, with no one to speak to. No one was waving at us through the window. We turned around and went home, still holding tightly to each another. That night, we wrapped ourselves up in Mother's bed, shedding tears and worrying very much indeed. As the big brother, I tried with all my might to be brave and consoling and not to think any thoughts. We felt like helpless chicks whose protection had disappeared, now exposed to the merciless sun and every menacing danger. Never before had we felt so abandoned, so alone.

My memory betrays me—why exactly was Mother arrested? She was freed the next morning and sent home. Perhaps her papers weren't in order, or they had found more smuggled goods in her bag than usual, and perhaps—or so I have an inkling—she had exchanged a few sharp words with one of the people in charge at the gate, and he had decided to teach her a lesson. I deduce this from fragments of a picture preserved in my memory: that morning, as we returned with Mother, we met Luria—a tall, smiling man, in charge of the work schedules for the *Komität*, and hence the constant object of a good part of the public's rage and resentment. One of the ghetto's songs was specifically about him, sung to the popular Soviet tune of "Captain, Captain" : *Tall man, tall man, give us a smile.*

He obviously had some long and special relationship with Mother, perhaps because of her directness and spunk. That morning he greeted her with a teasing, admonishing smile—so, was it worth it?—Clearly, he knew all about the incident. Mother replied with a taunt and we went our separate ways.

I do not recall that I ever asked Mother how she felt that night, her first time in jail, separated from her children. Or perhaps, if I did, it may have been more than my memory could bear.

Wolf Luria. Some months later, as the vise squeezed harder and harder, this strong, smiling man distributed poison to his family, and all of them together tried to commit suicide.

My Sister Falls III

One day as I was helping my little sister get dressed, I noticed some small red spots on her left foot next to her toes. That evening I told my mother about them, and she found, after a systematic search, similar spots on her lower abdomen and back. My sister wasn't complaining, and she had no fever. As soon as possible Mother consulted the doctors, and they had a blood test run on her—such things were apparently possible even in the ghetto. Their conclusion was that she had the symptoms of anemia, a result of improper nutrition. I learned a number of new concepts from then on: leukocytes, erythrocytes, thrombocytes. The initial blood counts for my sister were too high for some values, too low for others.

During the following months Mother increased her efforts to bring my sister healthy food from outside – chicken liver, meat, butter, and yeast. The high blood counts continued to rise, the low to fall, and my sister became weak and pale. Some years ago I spoke about this with Dr. Gurevitch, who had been one of the doctors in the ghetto. She confirmed for me that vitamin deficiency had a wide variety of symptoms among the younger children in the ghetto, including those I described.

I have almost no memories of Mother's involvement in the ghetto as a nurse. Perhaps she avoided practicing so as to keep her ties with others flexible; perhaps too she was afraid of exposing her profession since the Germans had burned the hospital and all its inhabitants. Even so, when an Aktion or other disturbance took place, she would wear a white band or a nurse's headdress, both to gain the trust of the German military and to ensure herself a measure of freedom in her movements in and out of the house.

On ordinary days she would sometimes set out to give an injection in someone's home, or apply suction cups to one of her friends — suction cups and leeches were common folk remedies used in the ghetto. To my sister she gave shots of vitamin B, which she obtained with considerable trouble. I remember the stainless steel container, holding needles boiled and ready for injection, little glass bottles, and the tiny saw used to open their necks, just like the apparatus I saw years later in the clinic of her sister Haviva, a kibbutz medic.

Once my sister had a fever, and stayed in bed for several days in a row. Worry overcame me, and I decided to do something about it: I opened a prayer book and looked up the prayer for recovery of the ill. Whispering, I devoutly repeated the prayer thrice over, several times a day, while anxiously watching over my sleeping sister. Once while I was at it, one of Mother's closest bartering partners came into the house by surprise. Embarrassed, I explained the situation. "And your mother didn't even mention it to me," he said.

My sister had soft and tender feet, and she willingly let me help her dress and undress. All of us had to practice dressing fast to be ready for any emergency. More than once she exasperated me, her responsible older brother, by teasingly making a mess of things. I would slap her bottom or complain about her in the evening to Mother. My sister did not let the matter go when I was mean to her, and when Mother came home from a day of backbreaking labor, she still had her work cut out for her making peace between us. My sister was only six and a quarter years old, after all, when she was moved across the fence. Some day I may have the strength to tell about it.

Mother may have avoided talking about her problems so as not to betray the extent to which she relied on the profits of barter and smuggling, which she conducted persistently and enterprisingly. Her dealings took considerable effort and caused her no small amount of trouble. She had to find buyers and suppliers; to negotiate with each one separately over the price of the goods, while ensuring a reasonable commission for herself; to smuggle the items unharmed through the ghetto gate, and deliver the goods to the buyer. The buyer had to pay her in currency or food—and these, too, had to be smuggled back into the ghetto. Both parties had to put their full trust in their intermediary—the Lithuanian had to trust that Mother was delivering good quality products, with no hidden defects; the ghetto dweller had to trust that Mother was getting the most she could for the item he gave her, and that she would not fall back on stories of confiscation of goods or payment while crossing through the gates.

It was a multi-faceted business requiring initiative, negotiation, and persuasion; she had to know how to improvise, and needed not a little

courage. To Mother's credit, she won the trust of all sides, and I never heard of any trouble except that one murky incident involving Hannah Snyeg's coat. More than once Mother came home frustrated, with the smuggled goods still on her—the deal had foundered, either because negotiations had failed, or the anticipated person had thought better of the bargain, or perhaps had simply not come to work that day. A good deal of physical effort was also required of her, thin as she was, for her kilometers-long walk carrying heavy goods—coats and suits one way, food hidden in her clothes on the way back. Our room buzzed with visitors during the evenings, especially on Sundays. And I picked up an odd assortment of knowledge, such as the exchange rates for different currencies, special units of weight and measure for cloth and wool, flour and barley, butter, lard, and bacon; I was even privy to deals using the Napoleon—the valuable gold coin of the French emperor and of Russian czars, as well as carats for precious stones and gold. Incredible as it may sound, in spite of the many confiscations, years of want and oppression, these valuable items could still be found here and there, being used for barter among people in the ghetto.

Thanks to Mother's efforts, we were never without a slice of bread and a little something to spread on it. The enhanced nutrition left its mark on my sister, who gradually grew stronger and healthier, even though she never fully regained the health she had before her days in the ghetto.

How did Mother bear such a heavy burden? Where did she find the strength to be forever vigilant, with sole responsibility for the fate of her two children? I do not know. She must certainly have received some moral support from her few friends. But I believe that what supported her most, aside from her own natural fund of inner strength, was a group of people into whose circle I was not admitted—the underground.

The Underground

For some time I had been aware that, on Sunday evenings, and sometimes also on weekday nights after work, Mother would attend meetings but remain perfectly silent about them. At a certain point, she began sharing with me her knowledge, for instance, about the situation at the front, very important knowledge, which, it was clear to me, did not have its source in mere rumors.

Although I was only ten years old, still I was a loyal listener, the family member closest to her. And although she never divulged the sources of her information, I gradually made the connection between her mysterious meetings and the knowledge she had.

A communist in principle—and perhaps formerly a member of a secret organization, for I found among her things one day a badge labeled MOPR (a secret communist body)—she also found comrades in the ghetto who shared her thoughts and ideals. These people were active in a complex network of underground cells, and Mother belonged to one. It was dangerous to do so, because it was well known that the Germans were on the watch for any secret organizations, especially Communists.

What exactly they did in Mother's underground organization I do not know. I know they met regularly and exchanged information that had reached them from various external sources—from radio broadcasts, newspapers, and people who came in from outside. I believe they also gave lessons in first aid. They helped friends in distress and engaged in other social activities. Did they also get training in arms? Apparently not.

Little by little, Mother shared more of her secrets with me. Why did she do this? Perhaps out of her own oppressive sense of loneliness, and perhaps also because she wanted to give me some little hope, the courage to look ahead at what was in store. I was proud of the trust she had in me, and of never disappointing her by betraying her secrets, and I loved the sense it gave me of being one of the adults. I pitied my poor little sister because she could not share the knowledge of secret matters. Occasionally, I hinted to her that I possessed secrets that had bearing on our chances of rescue. My sister was content with that, and went back to her play.

One day Mother came home, her eyes sparkling—there was a way out. She made me swear again to keep the secret, and told me that there was talk of smuggling people to distant forests to join partisans fighting against the Germans. The first candidates for such treatment were members of the underground and their families. Suddenly the horizon expanded, and hope was born. I had dreamt more than once of a surprise Russian attack, of a marvelous invasion by those many-tiered tanks or by parachutists from the air; all this, along with the miraculous death of the great oppressor, may his

name be blotted out—a deep-seated wish that people never stopped praying for. But salvation from the direction Mother now hinted at never had entered my mind. It was a possibility replete with all the most wonderful elements: deceiving the all-powerful Germans; a journey to distant, mysterious places; a chance for us, human dust, to join partisans who fought with weapons in their hands, taking revenge on the evil ones. And all of this in the forest, in the magical vistas of my childhood memories. Under the circumstances during those days, there could not have been a more marvelous fairy tale than the one now on Mother's lips.

The scrap of information that I thus picked up enabled me, in time, to understand something of the underground's ways without having to ask direct questions. I understood that at the head of the organization in the ghetto stood our family friend Haim Yellin, one of the "Uncle Books", the sons of the chief librarian that I knew when I was small. I also deduced that Mother belonged to Dr. Golach's cell. She was the doctor in the children's ward at the little hospital that had been re-opened. It was to her house that Mother hurried every Sunday afternoon.

So I was not surprised when Mother talked a lot about a certain Moyshele Sherman, a man whose health concerned many people because of the heavy pains in his stomach—I knew he was an important comrade in the underground. Some time later I accompanied Mother to the mini-hospital located beside the Catholic cemetery. It was more of a semi-official clinic than a hospital—everyone still remembered the fate of the former hospital. Moyshele had a ghetto-style operation on an ulcer there in the little clinic, and his many friends came to wish him well. During the same visit, I also saw a man who was undergoing an improvised treatment for severe sinusitis by having his face, Mother explained to me, drained of the infection in the hollows of his nose and forehead. The look on his pain-ridden face, together with the name of his condition, sinusitis, haunted my memory for years. On one more occasion I visited the clinic, for emergency treatment of a stubborn baby tooth that had given me grief for years.

I can hardly complain about that tooth, when the pain it gave me was my own fault. Several days before the war broke out, I had run for my life from the dentist's chair as soon as I saw her coming toward me with the little alcohol

lamp, as part of her preparations for filling that tooth. I paid a heavy price for that reckless leap. Throughout my days in the ghetto and my subsequent wanderings, the cavity in that molar bothered me, as if I didn't have enough troubles without it. It was only after I came to Palestine that the tooth was pulled. What is more, the nurse in the Strauss Clinic in Tel Aviv sent along with me, on my return to school the next day, a note that I still have with me today. It reads:

Dental Clinic, June 9, 1947

Kaplan Shalom did not attend school on Sunday because of an abscess he has. The children can learn from his example that if they fail to treat their teeth on time, later they will miss lessons and damage their health.

Sincerely yours, Nurse N. Rabinovitz

When I gave that note to the school secretary, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Meanwhile, the preparations for moving out into the forests increased. Emissaries sent there returned optimistic in spite of failures and setbacks. Several liaison agents and scouting parties fell prey to the Germans, and the Lithuanian partisans were less than enthusiastic about accepting Jews into their ranks. In spite of this, the members of the underground kept their spirits up, driven as they were by hope that sooner or later they would flee to the forests, both to fight and be saved.

Scene: Sunday afternoon. I am with Mother making her weekly round of errands. We are still near the house, on the edge of the vacant lot across the street, when we see Haim Yellin coming toward us. Here in the flesh, in broad daylight, is the mysterious man of the underground, he about whom so many stories are told, whom few had seen lately with their own eyes. I gaze in admiration at the wonder-working man, who comes and goes without fear, who passes through the fence like an invisible man, who reaches the forest and, what is more, even comes back from there.

At the time I did not know that even in those circumstances he had the strength, in his various hiding places, to fashion a literary account of his daring experiences. I was amazed to see him anyway, because I knew that at the time he was supposed to be on one of his secret forays into the woods,

and that the Germans here were constantly searching for him.

With a broad smile and a hearty handshake he greets my mother. Mother, I see, reacts hesitantly, as befits a member of a conspiracy. My heart swells with pride to see the glorious Haim Yellin paying attention to my mother, and in full view of the public, no less. Nor does the deed go unnoticed by others. Later that day, my neighbors tease me, their voice full of meaning—"Nu, so your mother knows Haim Yellin, eh?"

And all the leader of the Jewish resistance in the ghetto does is ask, "Nu, Leah, are you still writing poems?" "No," answers my mother with a sad smile, "not as long as we're in this barrel" (*in dem kessl* are her words), "I can't. When we get out of here, then I'll write again." Then we part. *End of scene.*

Not long after, Haim Yellin was no more than a legend.

Among the survivors of the ghetto there must certainly have been those who were in Mother's cell. With their help, I might have discovered more about my mother's deeds in the underground. When it was possible to ask, I refrained from doing so, and now it is too late.

And one day I nearly dealt the underground a serious blow, not to mention the chagrin I caused my mother. Among the many who came and went in our room on Sunday afternoon, there was a certain young man whose face I saw several times; he would take a large envelope from my mother's hands and leave without a word.

One day Mother had to be out of the house during the evening, so she asked me to help—could I give the packet to the young man. I agreed, after Mother made sure that I would recognize him. At the appointed hour, about four o'clock it seems to me, a trading partner of Mother's, a nice man and a friend of hers, came to ask about her. Then he asked if she hadn't left something for him. I told him no, but then added, hesitantly, and then only because the man was always pleasant and friendly with me, that there was a packet here that I thought belonged to someone else. "Show it to me," he said, "I'll take a look and if it's not for me I won't take it." Although his suggestion was a reasonable one, I hesitated; something within me whispered not to do it. In a moment of weakness, however, and with much uneasiness, I gave him the envelope. He peeped inside, and seeing that its contents were indeed not for him, he handed it back to me and left.

Only a few minutes later, the other man came, and the error I had made was clear to me. I persisted in my folly by explaining, while handing him the envelope, that I had just about given the things to someone whom he very much resembled. The man showed no emotion, but merely went away. When Mother returned I told her, in an offhand manner, what had happened while she was gone. Her face darkened and became serious as she raked me over the coals—how could I have given something to someone it didn't belong to? I went over every detail of the chain of events; I told her how unsure I had been, and even went so far as to add—so I had shown the envelope to a good friend of ours, and he didn't take anything—what was so terrible about that? Mother only bit her lip and said no more. The very depth of her silence persuaded me that I was guilty of a heavy failure that I did not fully understand, of the kind for which I used to draw furious looks of chastisement from Father.

Several days went by before Mother spoke and let me know a little about the damage I had unwittingly done. The envelope had been a secret bulletin, a compilation of news clips and radio announcements that circulated through Mother to the contact person of another underground cell. I had made two mistakes that afternoon, the lesser of which was trying to justify my act of babbling to the second man. But the graver error was showing the material, even for an instant, to the wrong person. Because of me, my mother had been called and questioned closely—and for all I know, also seriously scolded; limits had been placed on her membership, and an important responsibility—cell leader?—had been taken away from her. She had nearly been thrown out of the resistance movement.

Fortunately for us, the wrong man, Mother's trading partner, behaved honorably and with tact. He continued to visit us with his own concerns and never so much as mentioned the glimpse he had of the material that didn't belong to him. More importantly, he never passed on what he knew; had he done so, the results could have been disastrous for the entire underground resistance movement. As for me, I was profoundly sorry for my blunder. I had betrayed Mother and had been the cause of a great distress to her. And the concealed wish of my heart, to be considered a full and equal partner, suffered a severe blow.

Yom Kippur

An autumn afternoon. We are playing soccer on the lot to the south of the apartment blocks. We play half-heartedly, with a kind of lassitude, until one of us says: Let's go to the synagogue. The suggestion is made simply, and simply agreed to; we all know why. And so, in the same natural manner we had played but a moment ago, we all turned to the shack at the bottom of the mounds that cut between us and the river.

We came to the house of prayer, which was full to overflowing. All were wrapped in prayer shawls, looking pale and dejected. At the time, it was already forbidden to pray in public; it was a decree that the people simply could not obey.

We stood in the doorway, peering curiously inside. In a moment we were seen by the worshippers, and a tremor seized the crowd. Here were the boys, come to the closing prayers for the Day of Atonement- the same boys who had never stopped making noise most of the day beneath the synagogue's windows. They surrounded us, as if embracing us and taking us into their bosom. Some of us found relatives; others were joined by friends who took them in. Our friend Eliezer the writer recognized me, took me to his side and gave me a prayerbook. As in years past, when I stood beside Father in the big synagogue with the choir, or with my grandfather in his village in his corner at the eastern wall, I now stood with Eliezer until the end of the closing prayer, *Ne'ila*.

There was much weeping, embracing, and heartfelt entreaty. There was something sobering in the air. The verdict, as every year, had been written "in heaven" and sealed. But there was a feeling this time that the expected sentence was heavier than usual, and that in spite of the sincerity of the prayers, the appeals and petitions for pardon had not been heard. We ended, as usual, by making the traditional wishes for the next year to be in Jerusalem and by blowing an improvised Shofar. Outside, they closed with the blessing for the new moon and "Shalom Aleichem" ("Peace Be Upon You"); then they scattered to their homes.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, 1943.

Winter

September

September came, and suddenly everything changed. The ghetto was declared to be a concentration camp—K.Z. (Konzentrationslager) Kauen—and was put under military rule. S. S. soldiers with black lapels and the skull and crossbones on their caps took the place of the brown-lapelled S. A. forces, and the change went far deeper than the color of their uniforms. Goeke was appointed chief commander of the ghetto, a high-ranking officer whose name became from then on indissolubly linked with everything that took place in the ghetto.

Decree followed decree. The Altestenrat was abolished, and with it our semi-autonomy; Dr. Elkes was now appointed to be the "Jewish elder," and he had to continue representing the public with much-restricted authority; S. S. men took away roles and areas of responsibility from the senior members of the Komitāt. The number of jobs outside the ghetto was reduced to increase control over the brigades; supervision increased over passage through the gate and along the entire fence.

The changes may have been dictated by the situation at the front, which was coming ever closer to us, as well as by putting the entire district under military rule. But they were just as surely driven by German decisions about handling the Jews. In any case, we felt we were in an ever-tightening noose. The ghetto seemed to retract into itself, waiting for the next blow.

Although we heard harsh stories about what was happening in other places where Jews were still alive, the belief took hold that we were a special case. They needed us; we were very useful to them, and were consequently immune from the calamities that befell other ghettos.

At the end of September, we heard the first news of the destruction of our sister ghetto - the Vilno Ghetto. Those among its inhabitants who could still work were sent to labor camps in Estonia; the old and the young were taken to the Ponar Forest, the killing site for the Jews of Vilno. A few weeks passed, and we were subjected to the Little Aktion.

In its first hours, when we first heard that the gates were locked and the brigades were not being sent out, we did as we had done before in such cases—we hurried to the cellar. Between one emergency and the next, we practiced our procedures for hiding there under the piles of junk. Mother even spread a few blankets and dark coverings, in case of need.

On that day, after we had spent a few hours waiting quietly in the cellar—I in one corner, Mother and my sister in another—and nothing happened, Mother decided to go up and check things out. There, after finding out that they were indeed removing people from the ghetto, but were using a list prepared in advance, and that the ghetto police rather than Germans were in charge, Mother concluded that the situation was not so serious. Only a few days before, the Komitāt had published announcements calling for families to enlist for work and residence in a new camp in the country, not far from our city. It was said that the Germans were establishing a camp of 3,500 people that would conduct itself as an independent body, somewhat along the lines of our ghetto. For this purpose they needed skilled workers of various kinds, as well as a few clerical workers. Registration was slow—people wavered, hesitating to leave their familiar corner. Mother guessed that now they were rounding up the people for the camp. Since we had already, to our sorrow, suffered the loss of the head of our family, we had nothing to fear this time; moreover, the Aktion was being conducted by members of the Komitāt, and she relied on the strength of their ties with her through Father. Accordingly, she gave us the signal, a series of short knocks, to climb back up to our room.

While we were still adjusting to the rest of the day's stay at home, two Jewish policemen came in, asked us our names, and ordered us to come with them. Mother argued with them, claiming that there must be some mistake—for we were unfortunately not a whole family, and did not meet the criteria for being transferred, and furthermore, we were still planning to join the head of our family, who was now in Riga. But the policemen were adamant—our names were on the list, and the list was what counted; any clarification had to take place on the selection lot. As we had no choice, we gathered a few clothes, just in case, and left the house with them.

I remember that we were not especially panic-stricken, merely confused, and we children stuck close to Mother, one on each side. We were sure this was a

mistake and that Mother would certainly put things straight. At the moment, what bothered me most was being dragged out publicly into the street, accompanied by two policemen—there may even have been a German soldier—with everyone looking on and seeing us in our distress— “they’re taking them, too.” As we were going up Varniu Street on our way to the Komitāt, we happened to meet Izzia Rabinovitz, who was appointed by the Altestenrat to be in charge of manpower and labor-related matters. Surprised to see us in custody, he confronted the soldiers and asked them to explain. After hearing them out, he gave a brief command to let us go. At the moment, we did not understand—at least, I didn’t—the full meaning of this command. Wasting no time, we hurried back home and, just to be certain, we spent all the rest of that day in our hiding place in the basement, in case someone came back to get us.

We discovered later that the Komitāt had failed, using its own lists, to collect the required number of people, in much the same way they had failed during the Riga Aktion; nor did the pace at which people were being rounded up satisfy the Germans. They had consequently begun to bring people using randomly chosen lists. By the end of the day, they had removed from the ghetto three thousand men, women, and children. Had they taken us half an hour later, Izzia would have been powerless to save us, for by then the Germans themselves had spread out, together with the blood-hungry Ukrainians, and had taken by force enough people to fill the quota.

In direct contradiction of their previous announcement about the new camp in the province, the authorities now announced that the captured people would be sent to labor camps in Estonia, and that letters would arrive from them in the next few days. And indeed, for the next few weeks, a number of brief, noncommittal cards did arrive. At the same time, a few notes thrown out of the carriages at train stations were brought to us by good people. Judging by the rail route, our people had indeed been transported north. In the ghetto chronicles, this event came to be known as the “Little Aktion.”

That same night, true to their methods, the Germans ordered the evacuation of part of the area of the apartment blocks.

Today we know also that during the same day, in the train station across the river, they separated the old people and children from the rest and put them

into cars that waited a few days on a lateral railroad track. The old and the young, a common adage at the time, emblem of the same final, shared fate. In those days and for a long while after, my heart went out especially to the children and their sad end. Today, as I approach the age of sixty, still in possession of my faculties and feeling like a man in his thirties, the terrifying thought strikes me that, at my present age, I might easily have been numbered among the elderly.

Those who were taken to Estonia were no luckier, however. When they got there, winter had already set in. They were made to work in the bitter cold, without suitable clothes and under inhuman conditions. They died in large numbers during the coming months. In the Ghetto Fighters' Museum in Kibbutz Lochamei Hageetaot, I have seen photographs showing what happened to those who survived, lying in piles arranged alternately crosswise and lengthwise between layers of wooden beams in Kluga Camp, waiting to be burnt. They themselves had laid the lumber out, and then lay down upon it before the Germans came down the rows to put a bullet through the head of each one - German efficiency. But then the Russians came, invading the camp before it could be burned in an all-consuming fire. Had the Russians not arrived when they did, we would never have learned about the end of the Estonian exiles, among whom were those taken in the Little Aktion from our ghetto, as well as Jews from the Vilno ghetto and many other places.

I cannot stop asking myself what might have happened if we had not met Izzia at that fateful moment. And this question, too, invades my mind continually: Was another family sent in our place to fill the quota? A painful question – one could quibble and say that when we were allowed to return home, families were still being collected according to lists drawn up in advance. But in any case, they later began taking whomever they could lay hands on, but even so they managed to collect only 2,800 people, not the 3,500 required. And those who escaped the curse, escaped.

Izzia was one of the few members of the Alttestenrat who managed to keep his good name, toeing more or less successfully the thin line between fulfilling his public function and remaining human. I escaped from the ghetto laden with debts. Mother is the only one to whom I am, in some respect, perhaps, finding a way to repay what I owe. But I am hard put to find a way to

repay the many others who lent their aid at various points in my rescue. In addition to Izzia, there were at least five Lithuanians to whom I owe nothing less than my life.

Barracks and Evacuation

Autumn ended and winter came, more depressing than the last. Its horrors had already begun transpiring in other places around us, and there was nothing for us to do but wait for them to reach us.

People were still recovering from the Little Aktion when Goeke's order came for "Kasernierung": the Germans decided to distribute workers and their families into four or five camps adjoining their place of work in the outskirts of the city. This way, they claimed, they could eliminate the time spent marching to work and back, labor sites would have steady workers, and overall production would increase, this being their top priority. Barracks residents were promised that they would not be cut off from the "main camp," the ghetto, and that the general Jewish appointees would represent them as well. A few weeks were allotted to complete the gradual transition to the barracks. In spite of the ominous terms "Kasernierung" and "Konzentrationslager"—barracks and concentration camps—this time the Komit t had no trouble filling the lists with those who were willing to leave. The anxious public cast about blindly for any hope to survive. Their guess was that, by living in the satellite camps that were tied to a few vital plants, they and their families would be somewhat immune from afflictions like that of the Little Aktion.

During the move to the barracks, the ghetto was ordered to reduce its space once more. This time, people were ordered to leave the westernmost part of the ghetto beyond the bottleneck—that is, the old Jewish quarter, hundreds of years old, the historical roots and trunk of the Jewish presence in this city.

I imagine that the Germans had good reason to evacuate Slobodka, of all places. First of all, they were thus able to remove the Jews from the main trans-national road. In addition, they would be uprooting them from their ancient abodes, a shtetl, with its convoluted blocks of buildings, one piled against another. From now on, the ghetto consisted of a much-reduced square with nearly straight sides, crossed by straight streets lined by simple,

fairly modern houses, many of which were separated somewhat from the rest, making them easier to control. Goeke was indeed tightening the noose.

And once again people had to leave their homes ; among them this time were the last of those for whom this was their first move—the original residents of Slobodka. Once more they had to search for a corner to live into crowd in among already crowded and embittered neighbors, to snatch up the spaces left by those who had been taken to the barracks. There was scarcely a household that did not take in new members.

In the end, several thousand left for the satellite camps, while in the ghetto there remained only eight thousand, a mere shadow of the lively original ghetto with a population of 30,000 from three years before.

Ruchama, with Arke and Maimke, were among those who were moved to the barracks. I do not remember how, or even whether we said good-bye—in those days, and even before then, each family tended to withdraw into itself. Later, I saw Ruchama several times in the ghetto, when she came on various errands. She said they were fine there; they lived in long barracks that had been outfitted with wooden, multi-storied bunks. Although the men were separated from the women, the children were sleeping with her in a lower bunk. During the day they stayed alone in camp, playing undisturbed. Ruchama seemed to be reconciled to these conditions.

At about this time, an execution took place that stirred the educated public especially. Soldiers came without warning to the house of Dr. Haim Nahman Shapiro and took him and his family away, including his aged mother, the widow of the ghetto's rabbi, who had died some time before. They were delivered to the Gestapo and taken a few days later to the ninth fort. No one could understand why. Could it be because he was a great and famous scholar of Hebrew Literature, a university professor who for two years had been in charge of the educational and cultural activities of the ghetto? And if that were the case, then perhaps all the members of the *Komität* were at risk. A wave of anxiety surged through the upper echelons of the ghetto, nor were they satisfied until their investigation had pieced together the links in this surprising turn of events. The cause of the tragedy turned out to be the naivete of the family's American relatives. Their over-zealous efforts to discover the fate of the well-known Shapiro family had brought the Red Cross

to submit their inquiry to the Germans. It was enough to bring destruction on the entire family.

One act of Mother's in particular revealed to me how low her spirits had fallen these days, for the first time—or perhaps this was the first time that she didn't hide her feelings from me. She had always nursed a hope that Father would one day be returned to the ghetto. And would Father's return have improved our lot? It would at least remove from Mother the sole responsibility for her children, and also relieve her of her deep loneliness—a loneliness she had never discussed with me. But as time passed, the chance of Father's return became slimmer and slimmer. The Little Aktion had shown us a glimpse of the danger we were in. Mother felt her strength giving out. In a moment of despair and hopelessness, she decided to request a meeting with Dr. Elkes, head of the Jewish ghetto.

What did Mother hope to gain from an audience with Dr. Elkes? What could the Jewish elder do for her at the time? Perhaps she believed he could bring about the return of her husband from Riga, or had some hope that he could help her financially so that she could improve her daughter's nutrition, who was suffering from a blood ailment; or perhaps she was already laying plans for my sister's escape from the ghetto, which would require a great deal of money. And perhaps her hold on the position in the Piltz-Fabrik brigade had weakened, and she needed to prevent being removed from her job. I have no clear memory of her motives for wanting to see Dr. Elkes, only that her need to see him was great. And perhaps, like anyone else, my mother, weakened or feeling weary, simply felt the need to cry out her bitterness on the fatherly shoulder of someone in authority—to say to him, enough is enough, I can't go on any more. When she was younger, she had relied on her even-tempered and always optimistic father, Shalom Zvi the tinker, as an unfailing source of encouragement.

The offices of the now deposed Alttestenrat had already been moved to a new location on the other side of Varniu Street, close to Goeke and the German headquarters. Mother brought us two children with her, perhaps to lend weight to her complaint, although she left us on the porch and went in to see Dr. Elkes alone. For a long time she stayed inside, and when she came out she looked serious and had tears in her eyes. Dr. Elkes accompanied her to the

door and patted our heads. Years before the war, when my Aunt Haviva still worked in the Jewish hospital before immigrating to Palestine, he was head of the hospital's department of internal diseases, and when my grandfather Shalom Zvi's kidneys failed, it was Dr. Elkes who recommended taking him home again, so that Grandfather would end his days in peace among his family, and not in the alienating surroundings of a hospital. I learned this much later, from an exchange of letters between the sisters, Haviva and my mother. All in all, Dr. Elkes and my mother knew each other well; as I have said before, the persons thrown together in the crucible of the ghetto were not strangers to each another.

Always pale, slow of gait and refined, Dr. Elkes had the uncommon courage to stand up to the Germans and speak with them face to face; often they listened to what he had to say. More than once, I am told, whenever he was about to meet Goeke, he parted from his family as if he would never return to see them again. I always imagined that the pallor of his face, which reminded me of the synagogue cantor during the closing prayer of the Atonement Day, or of the face of Mek hanging from the rope, was caused by his meetings with the Germans. I never heard it said of him that he showed partiality or perverted justice.

Whether Mother felt better after her talk with him, I do not know. She did, however, leave his presence with a note for the Komit t warehouse stating that she was to receive new shoes for her children. It appeared he still had some kind of authority left, after all. I do not recall Mother ever again asking for help. After seeing that the establishment had no power to save, she turned to other sources.

Goe - ke. Like Rau - ke, S - S, ghet - to—pairs of syllables that send shudders up and down the body.

From our perspective, Goeke was the sole ruler, the supreme power. Parents whose patience was at an end with their children would threaten, "Goeke will come and get you." He himself was a paragon of deliberation and cleverness, from his point of view, hard-driving in his dialogue with Dr. Elkes, but never losing his temper and showing no signs of personal cruelty. I remember his name better than that of any other German, perhaps because he was

commander of the ghetto at the end, when he put into effect the most dramatic measures the ghetto had ever seen.

I feel a kind of ambivalence toward him, something like the dependence of a hanged man on the hangman. For so many years he has been with me, till I have split and become two; he seems to be already a part of me. Do I hate him personally? I wonder, every time I meet a young German.

How ironic fate can be—later, Dr. Elkes and Goeke, in spite of their vast differences, met their end on the same date. The following autumn, Dr. Elkes finally succumbed to fatigue and illness in the Dachau camp, and on exactly the same day, according to our ghetto chronicler, his nemesis was killed on the Italian front.

Gas

That fall people began speaking of gas.

Sunday, a sunny day: Mother, myself and my little sister are taking an afternoon walk while Mother is giving us the news. Suddenly, my sister asks—Mother, does it hurt to die by gas? Mother—a registered nurse—answers with the same directness she always did when explaining health-related topics—no, you feel nothing; you go to sleep and don't wake up. And I, in the fraternity of adults, hear myself adding my voice, no, it doesn't hurt at all, you just go to sleep and that's it.

The words of a mother to her daughter during a sunny afternoon stroll in the ghetto.

It was a time when the question of dying and the ways I could expect it to happen were always on my mind. Where were the people being taken, what happened to everyone in other ghettos around us, who, according to rumors, were one day loaded onto freight cars and taken who knows where? The memory of the old folks sunk in their sleep in Democrats' Square, or of Mek swinging on the rope, were always before me whenever I dwelt on death.

These images were reinforced for me during funeral ceremonies after the liberation as well, whenever the Russians displayed, in open caskets, the bodies of senior officers who had died on the front. They all looked so calm; their faces peaceful—my imagination tended to avoid conjuring up another possible image of death, that of killing pits like the ones at the Ninth Fort. And

I had visited such a fort during a class outing one spring before the war—a huge stone structure sunk into the ground, surrounded by a deep moat, with large gates of rusted iron. When we began speaking of gas, I pictured to myself how they might force masses of people into the huge halls of such a fortress, lock the gates, and turn on the gas.

What is the best way to die? It was an important question that recurred with increasing frequency in our conversations. Mother would reply—she loved reciting—from Lermontov's "Metsiri":

Death does not discomfit me

There, they say, one's troubles melt.

And for years, I have translated this to myself, not entirely, perhaps, by accident:

There, they say, is an eternal sleep

The days were coming when I would recite this verse to myself like a mantra of salvation, my body shaking, holding onto the cold, hard words, to give courage to my frightened soul.

And my little sister, or Mother—did those lines help them through their final moments?

For the entire three years we spent in the ghetto, we were always on the verge of being forced into one of these two deaths—to stand at the edge of a pit or be carted to the gas chambers. It was only a question of time before we knew which scenario would prevail. At times I feel as if a part of me is still in a state waiting.

At the end of that third summer, my father was transferred from the Riga ghetto to a labor camp near Kaiserwald. The regime there was the harsh one of a concentration camp, run by a monster named Zauer. One day they discovered a small pencil and a scrap of paper in Father's pockets—for what else would they find on Father? They gathered all the inhabitants of the camp for Appel (roll call) and put Father on a gallows with a large bar of soap in his hand, so that he himself could soap the rope that would choke him. Even while he was soaping his collar, as he tells it, even then he did not stop exchanging black humor jokes with the assembled crowd. And if the camp commander had not changed his mind at the last moment—some say it was because of a surprise visit by a senior officer to the camp just then, and

hanging a Jew, hard as it is to imagine, was not felt to be proper in those circumstances—Father would have lost all opportunity to retell the story, with all his humorous embellishments.

With almost fixed regularity these dreams return to me—of long barracks, of waiting lines growing ever shorter, of a transport about to get underway. In my deepest sleep I find myself trying with all my might, my heart pounding, to find a way out, to be rescued, and each time it becomes harder and harder to get away. From one dream to the next, the moment of escape comes a split-second later, and always the indelible feeling remains that this was but a temporary respite, a provisional flight only.

Mother Seeks a Way Out

It surprises me how little I recall of the last winter at the end of 1943. I was slightly older then, almost an adolescent; I should be able to remember. According to books on the history of the ghetto, those days were a long episode of unrelenting oppression and murder, despair, and hopelessness—the front advanced and receded, and reports of German defeats multiplied. The Russians were clearly growing stronger; sooner or later they would reach our area. The big question was what would happen to us in the meantime.

The feeling that liberation was approaching in only a matter of days motivated people to dare search for ways of escaping. Although the Lithuanian public remained on the whole openly hostile and unkind, the number of humane people grew who, in light of the tremendous changes on the front, were now more willing to take risks and give shelter to former friends. With them were greedy swindlers who now saw a chance to make money—were not the Jews immensely rich? And there were also Lithuanians who reckoned they should try to improve their image in the eyes of the advancing Red conquerors.

There was great danger of being turned in, however. Death awaited not only the trapped Jews—usually at the Ninth Fort—but those who hid them as well. Hiding was likely to be easier in distant villages where there were fewer houses, where there was less supervision, and where the ties between neighbors were friendlier. Few were the Jews, though, who had such connections any longer, usually those from the country whom the war had

forced into our ghetto, and who now succeeded in renewing contact with their former neighbors.

Could one escape to the forests and hide there? The forests I remembered from my childhood were in fact small ones, situated near settlements. One could shelter in them for a few days, living off berries, as Dr. Gurevitsch and Ettele did during the last days before the Russians arrived. But prolonged concealment in winter was impossible in such places. There remained the fabled forests in the east, surrounded by swamps and crawling with partisans fighting against the Germans. At great risk and with heavy losses, it was there that those of us who were organized headed, led by Haim Yellin.

Those who managed to attach themselves here and there to the partisans on their own, did not have an easy time, either. My friend Sonya, a toddler whose fate it was to be born just when the war started, spent the first years of her life in the forests on her mother's back. In winter, they hid in a dirt dugout with a fire in the center. This was so much a matter of course to her, she has told me, that once when they were allowed into a regular farmer's house, Sonya asked her mother in wonder why no fire was lit there. One day she scraped her leg, and her mother took her to a nearby stream to wash the wound. When they returned to the group, they discovered that, in their absence, the partisans had killed all the Jews among them.

Anyone whose escape meant moving from one place to another, or living somewhere with a borrowed identity, depended for salvation first of all on their external appearance, on how Aryan they could look. Failing in this, they had no chance of surviving, and people with dark hair or the typical Jewish nose were doomed. Women began bleaching their hair with hydrogen peroxide to face the coming days. But my mother, with her long nose and curly dark hair—in spite of the gray shining through it more and more in the last years—nevertheless dared many times to venture morning and evening into the streets of the city, well wrapped to conceal her Jewish appearance.

Then there was the barrier of language. Ah, language—fluency in Lithuanian was a matter of life and death, in particular how well it was pronounced. The rolling 'r' that most of our fellow Jews cannot control, could make the difference between life and extinction. How fortunate was my friend Perkele. Thanks to his excellent accent, he was able, after escaping from the transport

train, to look for shelter among the Lithuanian peasants, even when his father's friend, to whose village he had trekked for many days, would not so much as open the door to him. And also when the Russians arrived, this difficulty did not disappear. "Say 'kukuruza'" (Russian for "corn"), or "say (in Russian), 'sweet ripe grapes grow on Mount Ararat'"—these were two *-r*-rich utterances used to mock us. I would say to myself—if I live, I will raise my children to speak a foreign language with a soft 'r'—just to keep them from trials and tribulations from the start.

In the end, escape from the ghetto was feasible for only a very few. Common folk, simple people without connections, money, and language, had no choice but to huddle together and wait for the end decreed for them, like sheep for the shearers. Mother, however, did not give up; she decided to look for a way out. As for herself, she relied on her membership in the underground resistance and its plan for gradual dispersal to the forests. Her concern was for us children. At that time, rumors were afoot about a new kind of Aktion that would target exclusively the old and the young. We began to hear stories about parents smuggling their children out and delivering them to Lithuanians. When Mother first heard of it, she said—we'll never split up, we'll stay together, for good or ill. Secretly, she hoped she would be allowed to take her two children into the forest with her. In time, as she came to realize that the chances of doing this were slim, she still hoped that I, who was a ten-and-a-half-year-old, could stay with her. Accordingly, she decided to start looking for a safe place for my little sister.

At first the idea seemed absurd and completely unrealistic. Few Lithuanians would agree to house a Jewish child. There seemed, on the face of it, a better chance in delivering children to a priest or a monastery—the clergy were generally considered to be more compassionate, at least as long as the children could be baptized. Of what importance was baptism, in light of the other likely alternative? Nevertheless, some parents were put off by the idea that their child would grow up in all respects a Catholic.

And I, too, when the time for my own escape came, found it hard to imagine participating in their rites, taking the communion wafer under my tongue, praying and making the sign of the cross like the acolytes who passed mutely by our house before the war. This is what happened to my friend Ruti. She

told me that, decades later, when she happened to be on tour in Europe and came to a small Czech church, she inadvertently made the sign of the cross. But giving children to monasteries was also complicated, an option limited to the few who had the connections to do it.

Stories were passed around about complex operations to smuggle children out, mostly babies, sedated in a bundle or knapsack. First it was the children of a high official in the ghetto, or the son of previously wealthy people who was entrusted to a former nanny in return for a large sum of money, precious stones, and promises of goods—most of it payable here, the rest across the ocean in the days to come.

Such is the way of the world. Often when I hear stories of miraculous rescues, my trained ear picks out, almost between the lines, such key sentences as "Luckily, we had possessions in the village," or "Mother managed to hide a few rings with precious stones in her clothing," and so on.

Mother had no connections, possessions, or money, but she didn't let it stop her. She stubbornly began inquiring among Lithuanian workers in the factory and acquaintances about the possibility of hiding children. It appeared easier to find shelter for a girl rather than for a circumcised Jewish boy; and the younger the child, the better its chances, since it would arouse less attention, would adapt faster, and grow accustomed more easily to the ways and the foreign language of its new family. All these reasons strengthened my mother's resolve to prefer first to transfer my sister.

Preparations

How does one deliver one's child to strangers under circumstances of extreme danger? How is it done? So many arrangements to make. Even if the people seem friendly and decent, will they be nice to your child, and can they keep a secret? Is their house sufficiently isolated, do they have hostile neighbors or a policeman living next door? Do they have relatives in the country where your daughter can be safe when danger is near? How sagacious will they be in devising a credible cover story that will arouse no suspicion? How swiftly can they react if they need to hide your child in an emergency, and will they keep their presence of mind? Do they have enough composure to refrain from demanding that your daughter return at the first

difficulty they encounter? Are they likely, perish the thought, to become fed up and deliver your daughter to the Germans? And are they, after all, merely cynical crooks, doing the work of the Gestapo?

Many were the details that Mother had to gather and check before she could make up her mind. With considerable discretion and tact, she then had to consolidate all this vital information. A Jewish mother, alone and frail, bending under the physical burden of work in the brigade, had to sum up and weigh all the factors and all the alternatives—none of which were certain—and arrive at the fateful decision: whether to trust the Lithuanians, to give up into their hands her own daughter, or to forego the entire enterprise, the daring deviation from the norm, to succumb to the temptation to "sit and do nothing" being forced upon her and leave her daughter where she was.

And to be alone with these uncertainties, without a helpmate, with no one to share the responsibility or the decision. Certainly, she confided in me, her ten-year-old son, telling me quite a bit. I was her sounding board for some of her worries, or that part of them that she was ready to share with me. In the end, after many hesitations and grueling negotiations that included money and payment arrangements, Mother decided to deliver my sister to Martha's family.

Martha was one of the workers in the felt boot factory. The opinion of her fellow workers about how decent and honest she was—most of them were also neighbors—was by no means unanimous. Furthermore, one of her or her husband's relatives was of German extraction. That she had no children was important, although this could be either an advantage or a hindrance. On the one hand, she might show special interest in raising the child entrusted to her care; on the other, she might be too strict with her or fail to show enough affection. And yet again, the absence of other children in the house would prevent idle chatter in the street on the one hand; but on the other, the sudden appearance of a little girl in such a family would draw the attention of neighbors. As far as money went, the family made a good impression, appearing to be neither over-demanding or greedy. They were satisfied with a modest sum up front and monthly payments that were not too high, most of which covered actual costs, including nutritious food for my sister. They stated repeatedly that they were not doing it for the money.

Their house was in a neighborhood of simple laborers on the Green Hill, across the river from the ghetto. They too had reservations before making their decision. It seems to me that there was even some difference of opinion between the couple, but in the end the demurring side gave in. I believe it was the husband who was initially against the plan.

There were three in the family—the couple and their elderly mother. To this day I am unsure which of them was German. Mother stayed with them once overnight so as to know them better. They seemed humane and sympathetic to her in spite of the German background, which at this point even seemed to give them a certain advantage in terms of security. Now the child had to be prepared, final details to be worked out, and a means of getting her daughter out of the ghetto had to be found.

I have heard many stories about parents who, at great risk to themselves, succeeded in arranging a hiding place, only to have their child either refuse to go or fail to hold up against homesickness in the new place and return. Mother had spent a good deal of time preparing my sister even before she knew what the solution would be for her. She explained the great danger facing children who stayed in the ghetto and the need to take any opportunity to escape; I too, like her, would be leaving soon, and all of us would meet again before too long, as soon as possible. At this point in Mother's talk, I added my own assent, nodding in approval, and to this day I am troubled by the memory. In the meantime, Mother added, my sister had a nice place waiting for her with people who loved children, in a house with a yard where she could play all day without fear, where she would have plenty of good food to eat.

Mother gave my sister her solemn promise that as soon as the danger passed—as it was expected to do, very soon, as soon as the Red Army arrived to free us all—she would immediately come to take her back home. My little sister understood. With full trust in Mother's promise, she accepted her fate. She was a wise old woman aged six years and four months, having spent a third of her life in the ghetto. How much longing, fear, and sorrow her little heart had to bear, we can only imagine.

Perhaps that is why my friend Ruti, who was taken out of the ghetto at about the same age as my sister, does not remember a thing.

My Sister Leaves

Towards the end of December, on the shortest day of the year, my sister left the ghetto. How do I know the date? Because of another event that occurred that day that is recorded in the ghetto chronicles—the final day of evacuating Slobodka.

In the dark, cold evening, they went through the gate, hidden inside a brigade. Immediately outside, they broke rank, slipped into nearby alleys and slowly, cautiously made their way over the bridge and along the other bank of the river to Martha's house.

Mother stayed with my sister in Martha's house for two nights and a day before parting with her, and I cannot remember her ever being so furiously angry as the night she returned, alone, to the ghetto. Small wonder—I remember trying very hard to keep my spirits up that evening, trying to ignore my contribution to her current bout of anger—for of course she would be angry—she had just left her daughter in the hands of Lithuanians. In an act of defiance I got up and fled outside into the darkness, into the curfew and the cold, wishing I would be caught and arrested. And just then, the sirens sounded, the few lights around were extinguished, and I found myself in pitch darkness—an air raid was approaching our city. I could hear the soft buzz of airplanes through the heavy winter clouds. Confused searchlight beams started up like a pack of hunting hounds from different parts of the horizon, converging on a certain spot in the heavens, as if trying to blind a hidden opening that was about to split the sky. It was terrifying. Until that evening, I had almost never seen an air raid developing, since we were usually ordered to come inside under such circumstances. I will stay out this time, I thought to myself, I won't go in, and let a Russian bomb fall on my head, then Mother will be sorry.

Two days before this, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the other kids and I were still gleefully looking for gold from house to house, flat to flat, in the area that would be turned over the next day to the Germans. An entire quarter lay free for the taking, and there wasn't a door behind which all the treasures of Ophir were not waiting for us to root through and claim. Even though people had completed the evacuation several days before, from our point of view the

houses were still packed with all manner of goods. I had promised Mother I would return home on time. It was four already, and I knew it was getting late, but it was hard for me to recover from the seductive giddiness that had seized me since morning.

When I finally returned to my senses, as from a deep dream, I realized I could no longer make it home in time. Instead, I ran straight to the gate, hoping to meet my mother and sister on their way there, or at least meet them before the brigade left for work. But I was too late—the space around the gate was empty.

My little sister. I had tried to teach her things—reading, arithmetic, a little geography. She could already identify the dog of Scandinavia, its bone, Denmark, and its peninsular tail, Kola. Sometimes when I tested her and she couldn't remember one area or another, she would point sweetly and slyly to the Kola Peninsula, just to placate her demanding older brother.

Some day I will write to the researcher on children's poetry in Indiana; I've thought about doing it for years. At a Congress for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, she lectured about poems for children by Kadya Molodovsky. Dear Madam, I shall write, I once had a little sister who loved poems. One that I used to read to her was by Kadya, but though I have looked for it in many and various books, I have not found it yet.

Mein Schvester! un ikh / mir hobn beide ein por shikh:

(My sister and I, we both share but one pair of shoes)

Perhaps she knows where I can find the poem, and what the rest of the words are.

Several days before my sister left the ghetto, she developed a small sore by her upper lip. A yellowish scab peeked out from under the olive-colored woolen hat that Mother had knit for her; no doubt she wore it on her head on the day she left, too. And I thought to myself, I hope the Lithuanians don't change their minds because of the sore. "Why isn't he here? Why didn't he come to say good-bye?" she cried—so Mother scolded me when she returned.

And I came too late. Dear little sister, I cannot pardon myself for not coming on time to part with you; I cannot forgive myself for being the one of us two

who remains alive. I would crawl on my knees like a pilgrim, I would go to the end of the Kola Peninsula for solace and forgiveness.

All the preparations of that day, the last few hours that we three could have spent together—I ruined. What she wore on her way; which toys she took with her; the words my Mother used to soothe and encourage her, and the replies my sister gave; without a parting hug or a kiss from me she went through the gate. How she felt the rest of that day and in the days to come; how well the yellow scab on her upper lip healed—I go wild when I think about these things.

There are those who drive the roads and freeways speeding over steep embankments and deep gorges with never a thought as to how much goes into building the road on which they sail so securely. And I—one cannot know how much pain, how many tears, went into writing these things. One night I dreamed that I myself delivered my little sister to the Germans. Silently, with slow and measured steps, I hand her over, without a word—so that the child won't understand—to a woman camp guard with the stormy face of a kapo. I approach in a circular path from the right; she comes toward me in a circular path from the left, and at the point where the two circles intersect, I ceremoniously extend my arm and deliver the soft hand of my sister, which I have been holding until that moment. The two of them continue circling in the opposite direction, then turn into an arched entrance like those of the railroad tunnels in our city, or like the crematoria cells. This ritual takes place in utter silence. Our faces are expressionless. At dawn, I was exhausted and broken.

Broken and grieving, Mother returned to the ghetto. Upon her return, she encountered a new and painful reality—in her absence, they had moved another family into our tiny room, with a baby who occupied precisely the corner which had belonged to my sister only two days before. For this, too, she blamed me—why couldn't I have put them off at least until she had returned from the city? The strong odor of kerosene—for killing lice—and urine filled the room; we were crowded to the point of suffocation; and I hated the new roommates who had been forced upon us from the moment they first came, through no fault of their own. They were a young couple, congenial and accommodating by nature; but they came in at a bad time for us. They took up

the inner half of the room, and spent all their care on their baby Motele. From here on, Mother and I shared a single bed next to the north window.

In her bitterness, Mother made no effort to remove the tension that had grown between us during the days since she returned. And I, like a stubborn calf, refused to talk to Mother for several days.

The physical presence of the strangers bothered my mother much less than it did me. From this point onward, the news at home focused on what Mother heard from work about my little sister and her Lithuanian family. In spite of false starts and difficulties, it appeared that things were beginning to go smoothly. My sister cried a lot for the first few days, refusing to be consoled. She yielded slowly, however, and her ties to the Lithuanians improved. She began saying words in Lithuanian and trusting the grandmother in the family. But even so, we heard during the days to come of occasional outbursts of anger, of sudden fits of crying, and of capricious stubbornness. Mother could only pray that Martha and her mother would be tolerant and wise enough to understand the distress of a little girl cut off from her home, and not rush to to regret their actions.

For seven whole months my sister stayed in Martha's house, eating at their table, drinking from their cup, and being as their daughter.

My sister was taken out of the ghetto on December 22; on the 26th, members of the corpse-burning squad of the Ninth Fort, availing themselves of the Germans' laxity on Christmas, made a daring break. . Their escape, a brilliant operation, meticulously planned, prepared painstakingly over a very long period, took them through locked iron gates, forgotten dungeons and cavities / in the depths of the ancient fortress, until at last they were outside. A few of them succeeded in returning to the ghetto, but it was impossible to hide them anywhere near human habitation, in part because of the indelible stench of rotting corpses that stuck to them.

A New Year

It was the beginning of 'forty-four, like the number of our house on Vigriu Street.

During these months, the flow of escapees to the forest grew. The Russians were not far away, and perhaps because of this, as well as the expeditions of Haim Yellin, the hard stance of the Lithuanian partisans softened somewhat. This was clearly the last chance to get away before the ghetto was liquidated. Mother was excited and hopeful. Had it not been for her two children, she would no doubt have been among those who left. I also imagine that her involvement in underground activities strengthened her resolve to find places for us with Lithuanians. She certainly drew the courage to tramp the city streets morning and night from the personal example of fellow workers in the underground.

Almost weekly, depending on the circumstances, Mother tried to spend the night with my sister. This is how she did it: at the end of her work shift in the factory, she would slip into the Lithuanian locker room, change her clothing, and leave at dark through their exit into the street. After about half an hour's walk uphill, I imagine, she would reach Martha's house and cautiously slip inside, taking care not to be seen by anyone in the nearby houses. In the morning she would either return to the factory the way she had come, or would go down by the river, which was not far from Martha's house, and blend in with the brigade as it came up the bank, carefully donning the yellow patch as she did so. And so it was each time. It was an act of real daring to cross the city each way, not to mention the risk she took of being cut off from her main base, the ghetto—anything might happen to us during her absence, and the brigade might change its route on any given morning, or be canceled entirely. I would rather not think what might have become of me had anything happened to Mother while she was in the city. The underground conspiracy was also at great risk. If, God forbid, she were trapped there, it was not only the two or three of us who would be lost, but many of the underground's secrets and the fate of its leaders would be jeopardized. It was only through my Mother's courage, however, that my sister had a chance of living.

It relieved mother greatly that she was able to meet Martha nearly every day—or at least to see her, even from a distance—at the factory; few indeed were the parents who had given up their children and could yet enjoy such a privilege. Such contact was certainly also marked by pain, like the pain of a mother who continues to meet the people who have adopted her baby.

I lived in the city for a year and a half after the war, and never once did I try to find the factory where my mother worked or reconstruct the path she took to walk to Martha's house, let alone go up the house—any more than I thought of visiting the Ninth Fort.

During her night-time visits Mother did her best to smooth ruffled feathers, to put people in good spirits, to radiate optimism—she, from the ghetto. On the whole, she managed throughout the entire period to maintain a relatively good and trusting relationship with the Lithuanians. At a certain point they started hinting to her—perhaps she understood it on her own—that she ought to visit less frequently to help her daughter adapt. She may even have taken the initiative to appear less, at no small emotional cost to herself. Martha sometimes complained that following Mother's visits, the girl was more "difficult." It was certainly to the advantage of both sides to reduce the risk incurred by frequent meetings. So during the next few months, Mother's outings went out less often. When her last visit to my sister took place, I do not know; when summer came, in June 1944 it seems to me, about half a year after my sister went to live with them, Martha informed Mother that with the war front drawing ever nearer, or perhaps because summer resorts were opening, they were leaving with the girl for their family in the country—and no one ever saw them again.

Friends

Who were those friends of Mother's at the time, on whom did she rely when the burden on her own shoulders was so heavy? I occasionally amused myself with adolescent suppositions about the people Mother might be seeing whenever she was out of the house. I knew that on Sunday evenings she would be at Dr. Golach's. I cast a certain suspicion on the polite and generous merchant who used to see us on Sundays. And another of my candidates for her romantic relations was Eliezer, the author, one of the regular visitors at our house.

Eliezer and his wife Zipporah—black hair in a long braid, brown eyes, typically Jewish, and beautiful—were our loyal friends. Father does not know how large a place they had in our lives during those years. My father met Eliezer's elderly father in Dachau, but the couple themselves did not survive. Their friendship from youth kept itself alive, however—in Tel Aviv, Father later

reconstructed Eliezer's stories from newspaper archives and published an anthology of the works of his friend and fellow author, Eliezer Heiman. .

During the last winter in the ghetto, people of letters were concerned not only with their personal survival, but also with what would become of the fruits of their spirit. One day Mother returned from a conversation with Eliezer and declared that she had decided to bury our manuscripts and family documents in the ground. This was no simple matter—after a day of hard labor, or during already full weekends, in addition to all the disturbances in the world and growing fatigue, to burrow through the large amount of paper that my parents had dragged with them from place to place and decide what to keep, what to discard. Mother took on this task with the discerning practicality of a person writing her will—she chose her diplomas from the Vilkomir Middle School and her nurse's training at OZE, Father's diploma from the Teachers Seminary in Vilna and the University of Kovno, together with a photograph of the graduating class. In addition, she took Father's personal diaries, his writings, and her poems. All these she gathered, wrapped, and placed in the tin tub meant for boiling laundry. She also placed there, as I have already told, my album of stamps and seals.

Now the question was, where to bury the treasure. We considered hiding it in the double wall of the room, in the attic, or the basement. But Mother's inclination was to cover it up beneath the ground, as far as possible from the house.

Did she anticipate burning or destruction? There was always the possibility that possession of the house would return to the Lithuanians, who would doubtless throw away anything of no value to themselves. Burial in an open field was also problematic. It would be difficult to dig there undetected, and there would always be the question of locating the spot after the passage of time. So we came to the idea of digging a hole in a hiding place. We ruled out the cellar in our house for some reason (perhaps its floor was tiled or too hard) ; Mother may also have been put off by the piles of junk down there, which would have had to be moved, and furthermore, it was important not to disturb the natural look of the pile which served as our permanent hiding place. So the lot for the tub's burial spot fell to the floor of the storage shed that stood in our yard.

After a few evenings of digging by turns, taking care to scatter the dirt on the edges of remote vacant lots, Mother and I gradually dug a hole deep enough to hold the washtub. Before covering it with a layer of dirt over the top, Mother went inside the house, brought out a small plank that she had prepared, and, using a chemist's pencil (which cannot be erased, and which turns purple when moistened) wrote down a few lines. I can still see her writing something like the following lines:

***Here are the family manuscripts and papers of
the poet Leah Greenstein and her husband, the
author Israel Kaplan, who were incarcerated in
the Kovno ghetto with their children Sholik and
Jehudith from 1941 to 1944.***

She may have added other lines, and she probably wrote the same message in Russian.

Mother placed the board on top of the buried papers, and then we put the tin lid on. Above that we placed another board or flagstone, filled the top of the hole with dirt and tamped it down, and smoothed the surface so as to leave no trace.

A few years ago, after Eliezer's book had already been edited by my father and published, someone brought Father a strange photograph of a ceramic tile that a Jew had found while rummaging through the ruins of the ghetto. The tile was modeled after the two stone tablets of the ten commandments, and on it were printed lines of pure Hebrew in Eliezer's hand. When he came to Israel, the man gave the tile to Eliezer's family. The style of writing on the tablet immediately reminded me of Mother's. The tile was evidently a remnant of Eliezer's writings which he, like Mother, had tried to hide somewhere, although most of them have not been found.①

↪ ***Eliezer Heiman, his wife Zipporah, his father
Yitzchak, his mother Vichna, and his mother-in-law
Pesiah-Feigeh – among the remnants of Israel in the
State of Lithuania –we are dwellers in this House of
Slavery and Perdition, the Jewish ghetto of
Williampole on the outskirts of Kovno.***

II

I, Eliezer Heiman, from the surviving young Jewish authors in Lithuania, wrote with my own hand on these tablets as a memorial for the generations to come, Today, the 22nd of Elul, 5703 since the Creation, September 22, 1943 by the Christian calendar.

And so, suddenly, after many years, I discovered, like one of the Dead Sea scrolls, concrete evidence for the hazy memories I have about Mother and Eliezer, partners in the search for means of leaving tracks behind them. I read Eliezer's stories, so full of poetry and optimism, love of nature, and a deep affection for Lithuanian villages. He was only 36 when he died; I hadn't realized how young the adults around me were. Both Eliezer and Zipporah have relatives here in Israel and in South Africa. They are completely unaware of the warm memories I carry with me of their departed relatives. And so it is with other persons from the ghetto, now long since gone, and I like a living album which no one reads, hold their memories within me.

Evacuation of the old quarter further upset and crowded the much reduced population, and also created new acquaintances. Thus my mother became friends with a couple from the displaced quarter, he apparently a doctor, and she also from some field of medicine. We followed their tribulations while they looked for a new corner to stay in, and stored some of their possessions in the meantime. Amiable, generous, and good-natured, they were interested in Mother's hardships, dilemmas, and loneliness. Although they had doubtless been in the ghetto all along, from our point of view, they, and in particular the man, were like new reinforcements brought into the final stages of a game. They came from Germany or some other place in western Europe, and were different from the other people, and this appealed to me. And perhaps their attraction for me was simpler still—I missed an authoritative and optimistic figure like that of the doctor; I wanted a father.

"The doctor couple" considered it likely that the ghetto would be destroyed in the near future, and that its residents be moved, in the best case, to another place. If that happened—they said this in our presence, knowingly and with

resolve—they would either try to escape at the last moment, or they would commit suicide by taking poison that they kept with them, ready at all times. They were lucky—they had no children. Mother did not entirely agree with their approach, claiming that one must never lose hope no matter what the circumstances; one must always look for ways to survive.

Their belongings were also different from those of other people. With perfect practicality they offered me anything in their baggage that they no longer needed. Among the things I chose was a pack of postcards on which were printed the seals of different Swiss provinces. During the next few days I tried arranging these like playing cards in solitary games—I had nearly no playmates around any more, and my sister was no longer with me. So I played alone, my imagination floating freely above snowclad peaks, lakes, and forests. Years later, when I toured Switzerland, the whisper in me never stopped – the hope that I might discover the same set of postcards in some tourist shop, and I might recall a few lost memories.

One item in particular that belonged to the couple caught my attention from the beginning—a short, wide test tube, sealed with adhesive tape; in it, floating in a pungent liquid—probably formaldehyde—was a human fetus a few months old, in a characteristic pose with its umbilical cord wrapped around it. Perhaps the man had been a gynecologist before the war; I do not know. The fetus hypnotized me, captivating me as if by some spell—was I like that once, is that what my sister was like? And the fetus itself—had it not been put in a test tube, it would probably be a man now, perhaps here with us in this very ghetto. And if that were the case, perhaps it had been wise to prefer formaldehyde.

And yet, among all their treasures, it was this item that they hesitated to give me. I imagined, wildly, that this was their very own child, whom they were hiding in this way to bring it through the hardships of the ghetto in one piece. More likely, their refusal stemmed from their pathetic desire to restrain the chaos then rampant everywhere—a biological specimen like this had no business in the hands of a child. In the end, however, after repeated pleas that I made through Mother, the couple agreed that I could borrow the preserved fetus.

At the time, I already knew more than a little about pregnancy and fetal growth, thanks to Mother's explanations. She was always willing to volunteer information about the human body, physiological processes, and the causes of disease—always excepting matters concerning sexual relations, about whose very existence I remained – unwittingly – completely ignorant for many more years.

Like a silly rooster I went around in the ghetto with the test tube in my pocket, looking for occasions to impress young and old alike. This time I was able to surprise even my friend Johann, the young natural scientist. I became so fond of the thing that, when the time came, I took it with me to my hiding place; a foolish act that belongs already to another story.

And the doctor couple— did they survive, are they perhaps alive even today? I do not know—for I cannot even remember their names.

Winter's End

Things were different without my little sister. A deep sadness fell on us, indefinable but very distinctly felt. The ghetto around us changed, too, its new name—"concentration camp" rather than "ghetto"—finding expression in the constant stream of events, each more trying than the last, while rumors from other concentrations of Jews became more and more infuriating .

We were a diminishing population in an ever-tightening noose. The chance that the next blow would not fall directly upon us became smaller every time one fell. Many who saw no means of escaping began preparing hiding places for themselves near and beneath their houses. *Malinas*—"forest berries"—these hiding places were called, perhaps because of the way wild berry seeds are hidden within the fruit, or their capacity for camouflage among the foliage in the forest. In every second house they began digging burrows, concealing doorways, blocking hidden passages. Some excavated passages from their houses into other structures in the yard. If anyone spoke of them, it was to say, in secrecy and without adding unnecessary details, "They are making a *malina*," and there the matter dropped.

The young couple in our room did not stay with us long. No sooner had they moved in than they continued lengthy negotiations with a peasant in a distant village, a friend of their father's, about hiding their baby Motele. The farmer

was already willing to take the child, but its parents, lacking the strength to part with it, kept putting it off from one week to the next. Their conversations on the subject, their tears and sighs at night, filled our tiny room and sapped the rest of our strength. The peasant came to the city every few weeks, and each time they had to agree to make arrangements for the baby's removal later, during the next visit. Twice or thrice the parents regretted their decision at the last minute, after the man had already brought his wagon with a cradle hidden inside, close to the fence. Motele was finally taken out of the ghetto, wailing and heartbroken. His parents abandoned our room shortly thereafter. Without their baby, perhaps it was easier for them to find a more convenient place for the two of them, or perhaps it was simply too hard for them to go on living in a room where their baby's cradle had so lately stood.

The two of us were not long left to live alone. This time a woman and her child were thrust upon us. It was an odd story. Since they were not put into our room during any new forced evacuation, they still had another dwelling. We soon found out that the woman was the secret lover of an influential Komit t official, and it was he who arranged a second living space for her.

She was a woman in her early thirties, thin and tall. I didn't think she was good-looking or attractive, but she always wore perfume and lipstick. She was exempt from work, and all she did all day was to tend her nails and hair. She seemed well-educated to me, middle-class, a woman who had apparently opted for security at the cost of respectability. With her was her son, several years my junior, and I thoroughly hated them both. He was spoiled, a crybaby, and fatherless, and I pinched him and mistreated him at every opportunity. They didn't spend much time among us, because on weekends they disappeared somewhere for several days. I innocently imagined that they joined the official and his family for Sabbath evening supper. They were with us for a couple of months; then they disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived; we never knew where they went. Winter came nearer its close in the meantime; spring was on its way.

When did the plan for my leaving the ghetto begin to take shape? When Mother came to realize that there was probably no chance of my joining those leaving for the forests. At the same time, the inquiries she had made about finding concealment for my sister had left her with several strings to pull for

me. Mother didn't rush to make arrangements, however, because among other things, those who were willing to take me demanded a lot of money. And since it was relatively quiet in the ghetto, Mother continued to pursue other alternatives. Her assumption was that if the situation worsened, there would be signs that they were about to evacuate the ghetto, which people began to suspect more and more as the front once again threatened to reach us. When that happened, she would take the necessary steps to have me smuggled out. It was odd to imagine myself leaving here, all alone among Lithuanians. There were so many questions, so many qualms and dangers, that it was easier for both me and for Mother to leave the issue of escape from the ghetto in the preliminary stage of inquiries only.

And I have said nothing yet of Mina and her nanny.

A girl my age, pale, delicate, quiet. She was usually called Mineleh. When I came to know her better, I discerned a seriousness in her thought, a clear-sighted sorrow, that belied her age. Her father had been a teacher, a colleague of my father, who was taken away early. There remained the mother, who was chronically ailing, and her daughter. To help look after the daughter, they had hired, even before the war, a young girl from a small village who lived with them in their home. Together they had entered the ghetto, living in a room in the old Slobodka quarter, in an old house made of unplanned wood with a moss roof, like all the houses in the shtetl.

There was a great deal of loyalty among my father's friends. Hadn't it been his fellow teachers who came to help us on that chaotic day we were evacuated? For as long as Father was with us, he kept up his visits to this family; sometimes I would go along. After Father was sent to Riga, Mother continued to pay them calls as much as she could. I never saw Mina's mother when she wasn't in bed. Quiet, weak, but with a welcoming face, her long hair gathered like a pretty frame that became progressively darker around her fine, pale face, she was embarrassed by our visits each time anew. Ever grateful, she apologized repeatedly for being unable to return the kindness of our steadfast interest in her and her daughter. One day I learned she had died. Minele stayed on alone with the nanny, who never abandoned her. When the residents of their quarter were ordered to clear out of their houses, Mother

saw to it that the pantry adjoining the kitchen in our house was partitioned in two. The others in our house weren't keen on the idea, but they gave in; after all, Mother argued, the Komit t was bound to crowd someone in with us anyway.

So from now on, from the beginning of the last winter, Minele and her nanny lived beside us, their lives mixing with ours. Their presence probably made it easier for my mother to be absent visiting my sister. The nanny was a young girl, somewhat provincial, conservative in manner, full-bodied and bright-eyed, consciously pleased at the praise her devotion to her task brought her. What the two lived on I do not know, for the nanny was not on a work brigade; perhaps her health was bad. Instead, she worked at crafts or sewing.

Her manners began changing rapidly. With the move to the new neighborhood, she lost some of the restraint and inhibition that had characterized her behavior while Mina's mother was alive. She now threw herself into the river of life. Gold rings now adorned her fingers, and unsuppressed laughter issued from her room. As it happened, a goldsmith had begun singling her out for special attention, and her countenance showed that she enjoyed not only the secret pleasures that were not entirely contained by the thin walls of her bedroom, but also her newly gained status. As if with a magic wand, she changed from a backward girl into a woman who was always well dressed and radiant with alluring feminine charm. Wonder-struck, I would watch her lying about the house for days on end with fine silk stockings on her legs and fur-trimmed green slippers on her feet. Without a trace of embarrassment she would emerge for a moment from her chamber, dressed only in an open robe, asking for a match to light a fine cigarette, before shutting herself back in with the man who was adorning her with jewelry. The light smell of perfume, blending with the atmosphere of sin, filled my nostrils, turning the head of the eleven-year-old boy I was.

Half a year later, when I came to see the ruins of our house, I was surprised to see another object—a green fur-trimmed slipper, on which I thought I glimpsed traces of flesh.

Thus ended, perhaps, the sparkling life force of Minele's nanny.

Studies at Ort

I always thought that I was accepted into ORT School – or, to be precise, a vocational school whose teachers had graduated from ORT School before the war—only toward the end of the ghetto; that is, during the last winter. Ghetto records, however, state that the three large apartment buildings (A, B, and C), in one of which I remember that we studied, were evacuated the previous autumn. It is very likely then that the lessons took place in another building that was left to the Jews—not all of my memories mesh with historical data. Muki and other graduating teenagers had studied there during the years before, and we younger children watched them with curiosity and envy. One day they put on an exhibition of students' work. All along the walls the pupils' best work was displayed, arranged by various grades, starting from a straight-edged metal rectangle, then a protractor, a compass a thickness gauge, handles, and then the crowning work—U-locks and door locks, all of them made by the pupils. The rationale put forward by our people for establishing the vocational school was to train a cadre of new, skilled workers for the workshops; the Germans agreed. In actuality, it was an excuse to put teenagers in some kind of educational framework and give them respite from hard labor.

The polished surfaces of the items on display gleamed brightly. Their handsome appearance seemed to radiate a sense of stability and security, in direct contrast to the general feelings we experienced every day. Surely, to youth with such clever hands as these no harm could come. I remembered my wonder, mixed with envy, when one of the boys in my grandfather's shtetl invited me into his yard and let me sit in the driver's seat of a wooden box car that he had built himself.

There was a practical consideration—belonging to an educational program for craftwork might provide some immunity in troubled circumstances. Mother talked to whomever she talked to to arrange it, and as soon as I was ten and a half years old, I became an apprentice in the vocational school. Once more I had a taste of being a student in a school. I was given my first task immediately—to file the sides of a small block of metal into a proper cube with six smooth, straight, and matching edges. I filed and filed, then filed again, yet each time the ruler and protractor told the failure of my labor. Hour after hour,

I stubbornly worked the large file, until the piece of iron turned nearly all to shavings, with no better luck. In all my time at the institute, I never reached the stage where my work satisfied my teacher enough to let me advance to the next task.

My apprenticeship was short-lived. Tumultuous events occurred, and my studies in vocational school, my last educational endeavor in the ghetto, came to an abrupt end.

Spring

Sunday

It was an ordinary Sunday in spring between Purim and Passover. Many things awaited Mother's attention on the weekly day of rest. But Sunday was also the only day we could see one another a little, so I had taken to staying in our room rather than going outside with my friends.

The day began with our lying in bed awhile, talking. We had so much to tell one another—impressions of what was happening in the work brigades and outside the gates, conversations with Lithuanians, and chance remarks overheard from Germans. We were examining the crumbs of information that came our way from every angle, now about the war front—so slow in coming—now about what might await us in our ghetto in light of fragmentary news from other ghettos, always in the complete absence of any reliable measure to determine exactly what was happening around us. Here locked railroad cars had been seen standing on a side rail; there black-lapelled officers had been seen surrounding the fence as if planning something; now a high official had let slip a remark that swept through us like fire through a dry field. How were we to deal with these waves of information—and to remain sane, not to abandon hope? This morning, Mother was filling in the details of her last visit to my little sister and the results of her latest inquiries about a possible hiding place for me.

But there was no point in stalling; it was time to get up. There was cooking to be done for the coming week, as well as laundry, sewing, and taking care of many other matters.

It was a pleasant day that Sunday. Mother finished her housework early, put off going out until later, and sat down with me for the only meal in the week that we ate together. At that hour, my sister was probably coming home from church with her Lithuanians. Mother was at ease that day, although you could never be sure you really understood the meaning of her wise and silent looks. We were talking away about this and that, and had got to a subject she was very fond of—opera. Mother must have been in an exceptionally good mood, perhaps because her migraine wasn't bothering her that day. She may also,

after four months, have begun learning to deal better with the pain of having turned her daughter over to strangers. At any rate, she began humming parts of her favorite arias, just as she used to do a long time ago—perhaps the aria from *La Traviata*, or from Halevi's *The Jewess*, or the one from *Carmen*, which we had seen during the last year before the war. Even before the opera started she had prepared me—at a certain moment I was to avert my eyes from the stage and look elsewhere—Mother believed there was no need to frighten small children with scenes of bloody deeds. Still, even though I never saw that one scene except in imagination, music that tells of approaching death, frequently heard in operas, oppresses me even today.

One day a few years ago, I heard a heart-wrenching performance on the radio by a beautiful choir. It was part of Gounod's *Faust*, which Mother particularly liked, and which she sang to me in Yiddish—she had apparently helped stage the opera with an amateur theatre company. When I heard the lacy, celestial music again, recognizing it on the radio after so many years without knowing that I knew it in the first place, I felt as if I were in a shower of light, floating in higher spheres; from a distance of many light years the delicate music returned to me after being planted within me by Mother, and I found my eyes filling with tears, smitten.

In the first act, a chorus of girls sings softly in the background while Faust laments his wasted life in an aria. Thus they sing:

*Paresseuse fille / qui sommeille encore!
Deja le jour brille / sous son manteau d'or
Deja l'oiseau chante / ses folles chansons;
(...)
Toute la nature / s'eveille a l'amour!*

*Indolent girl, sleeping still!
Already the day is bright in its coat of gold
Already birds sing their wild songs,
(....)
All nature awakens to love!*

There, I thought, upon hearing the song so many years later, lies the soul's immortality, buried in notes like these.

Mother had wanted to be a singer. That same Sunday she told me—for the first time, which is why I remember it—that she had taken voice training lessons, a field of study that I hadn't known existed. Not content merely to know that there was such a thing, I begged Mother to show me what kind of exercises she did with her voice. So she sang several scales for me—the door of the room was closed—some rising, some falling, in the way of singers warming up, and I even pitched in, mimicking her and doing my best to follow. At a certain point I had to go to the bathroom. I opened the door to go out, and there in the adjoining kitchen were our neighbors, Rayah's parents, just finishing their meal. On their faces were looks of wonder, ridicule, and amusement all mixed together—the idea of letting oneself go in the middle of the day like that, and in the ghetto, too!

Later that day, Mother finished her errands and attended the meetings about which it was best to keep quiet. . When we met again after the curfew had locked everyone in their houses, she was still relaxed. She told me the latest news she had picked up from her underground cell, about the preparations for a large exodus to the forest in the near future. Early that night, we went to bed, with our clothes laid out, as usual, for quick dressing. In the light of the oil wick I watched from the shadows the fatigued body of my mother as she arranged her clothing for the next day. Her extreme thinness was an advantage whenever she needed to wrap up in a sheet, a tablecloth, or a fine suit beneath her tattered clothes. She re-arranged her smuggling corsets, which she had made herself. They were made of white linen, and their deep narrow pockets could hold flour, sugar, butter, or even eggs, one beside another. She wore this corset above her undergarments, which were those—so I noticed with a certain sadness—of a man, perhaps left over from my father.

It wasn't late yet, and Mother took something to read in bed; the two of us were alone in our little room. It may have been Gogol, an author she liked; she would read me his stories, translating freely from Russian. I remember the spotted cover, typical of a cover for account ledgers, of an old bound anthology of literature that she had pulled from a pile of confiscated books.

She especially loved reading the story of the lonely clerk who had dreamed all his life of owning a new coat—"The Overcoat". Years later, I found a reference to Akaki Akakyevitsch, the luckless hero of this story, in a letter my mother wrote to the author Nathan; she saw the clerk as a symbol of the routine, monotonous life that she herself would never want to live.

Or perhaps our imaginations roamed that evening to more poetic vistas. At my request, she may have recited, with pathos and poetic diction, the measured verses of Goethe's "Lord of the Forest" (Erl König), one of her favorites:

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

Das is der Vater mit seinem Kind.

(Who rides so late through the night wind wild?

That is the father with his child.)

My heart would race each time I heard the repeated attempts of the Lord of the Forest to entice the fever-ridden child from his father's bosom. The father cannot comprehend his child's cries of distress, and when he reins in his galloping horse at the doctor's house in the village, he holds the boy's dead body in his arms. And perhaps the words—"wer... so spät" raised echoes within me of another kind, the memory of a father's rebuke as he scolds his wayward child, evoking latent feelings of guilt. Shuddering, I snuggled close to my mother's side.

German words. How entwined is the language with my sense of self, in spite of myself, how it grips a part of me even today. In this language I first heard Mother say the words of the Lord of the Forest and the words of "Oh Tannenbaum"—the same language that now directed at us a salvo of *ACHTUNG, LOS, and HALT*.

The wind wailed outside. The remaining signs of winter struggled against the approaching spring. Our eyes were nearly shut in sleep. With a certain capriciousness, I tried to nestle into Mother's lap, making as if to nurse from her depleted breasts. The last time I had seen them was in the maternity ward, when her nipples had been covered by tiny metal cups filled with a yellow salve—apparently to heal an infection resulting from the energetic suckling of my new baby sister. Now, Mother informed me, with the dry

candor she always used to explain medical facts, that a woman's breasts have milk only after birth. I exploited the opportunity by asking her to show me the long scar down the right side of her lower abdomen, the result of her appendicitis operation, which she had told me happened while she was pregnant with me. Once more I wondered about the somewhat murky story, which I picked up in some way that is not clear to me, of the difficult labor she had had—in which, together with me, and perhaps through that very wound, a brother or sister had emerged—that is what I feel faintly within me, and no one has ever denied the story directly. In any case, in our present situation, the stillborn child was perhaps lucky never to have seen the light of day.

It was a blessed evening, the end of a long day and a good one, a day of closeness. Holding one another, we fell asleep. But even as we slept, our ears remained alert, ready to receive and sift through the sounds of the wind to hear other sounds too, sounds of threat or danger.

The night was short this time. By dawn, perhaps even before then, a new era had begun.

Monday

It was still dark outside, and there came the sound of a motor. For many nights I had been lying in wait for an unusual sound and here it had come.

Before I could even wonder what it meant, loudspeakers blared that everyone in the ghetto should remain in their houses. From this moment, everything happened automatically, although our blood rushed out of our limbs and our hands shook. In a tremendous hurry, we threw on our clothes, adding extra layers in case of need—Mother may have managed to grab a few items of food—and we bolted for the shelter.

Ever since the Little Aktion, we had practiced going down to the cellar, although I always felt there was something artificial about these drills that Mother insisted upon, as if they were a game of hide-and-seek; I found it hard to imagine that something would ever really happen to us. Now we rolled in among the different junk, the pots and the rags, as deep as we could, careful not to move anything more than necessary, so as to leave everything strewn about just as it was. Mother covered herself up with an old mattress, while I

crawled under a big wash-tub beside her. Outside, we began hearing motors running and soldiers marching. We held our breath—ready, listening, waiting. The cellar had two openings: the main doorway, descending steeply from beside the house's stairwell, which we did our best to leave neglected as we found it, its door partly open and stuck deep in the dirt slope, and a small window near the ceiling, facing Grinius Street at ground level.

The dim light that came through the window was no help—because I shut my eyes so tight it hurt—in distinguishing night from day. The day became a succession of sounds only, sounds sweeping over me in waves. The body tried to take up the least possible space, at the same time expanding into a gigantic auricle, a listening device that filled the entire space of the cellar, wound around its openings and nearly spilled outside.

Before long we heard footsteps approaching. It was frightening to hear them come so close. Singly, in pairs, in threes, they stepped together, firmly, sure of their goal. At first they went past our house, as if hurrying elsewhere, and you feel as if you are at the dentist's, thinking maybe that's it, it won't hurt anymore today; but they returned. Now we heard them in our yard, then on the stairs, ascending into the house.

The first wave of steps ended after a quick pass through all the rooms; the ones who came after turned over beds, moved furniture, rummaged through closets. When they were directly overhead, I curled up as tightly as possible, trying not to breathe. A wooden floor is so very thin, might it not also be seen through? Now I was no longer only a great ear, but also a great heart whose pulses echoed like the bells in the basilica beside our old home—how to keep its beating from betraying me?

The searchers left just as they had come, and we had not yet divined their intentions. A tense silence fell over us, through which we heard cries and shouts from a distance. So they were not only searching for people, but taking them away as well. By lists, or all of them? Suddenly a bloodcurdling cry broke through the window, like a close explosion—Moyshale! We heard short breaths, as if someone were struggling, and grunts of resistance; with furious curses and abuse the shrieking voice was silenced, until all that remained was a thin unending wail like that of a mortally wounded animal, and we knew—

they were taking the children! What had happened in other ghettos was now happening to us.

Again and again the thud of boots returned, combing our flat, passing from room to room, overturning and moving, never stopping. As if they had come with lists and refused to give up. Each time we turned once again to stone—if only they don't come down to the cellar, if only they stop searching the flat, if only they would go.

Then we heard footsteps in the yard, suddenly making a sharp turn, heading straight for the door of the cellar.

Two voices. They tried pushing through the narrow opening between the door stuck in the dirt and the door jamb. At first they do not succeed—

Wer Reitet So Spat

Wer Reitet So Spat

Wer Reitet So Spat

Wer Reitet So Spat

I do not breathe. My heart does not beat. All my strength is focused on curling up, shrinking in size, being smaller than an unborn baby, tinier than the head of a pin. The door is shoved with force, and gives. They grope their way inside, I am a stone. My eyes are shut so tightly I doubt they will ever open again. To vanish, to vaporize, to become nothing. And suddenly, something falls on them or in front of them, blocking their way. They apparently have no flashlight. One of them curses and says out loud, "It's darker here than in a nigger's ass,"

- wie am niggers ^cmarsh -

They turn around. Their footsteps climb the slope, leave the house, and fade away.

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

Ein Niggers ^cMarsh!

Ein Niggers ^cMarsh!

It took a long time for our breath to return, for our hearts to continue beating.

Mother broke the shock of silence first, explaining to me in a whisper what they were saying, vulgar words that meant life for me at the moment. Immediately, she decided to act. If she had been the rider in the forest, no doubt the fate of the child in the fable would have been different. Now that it was clear to her that this was an Aktion directed against children, she would leave our hiding place and go up. An empty flat would raise suspicion and invite trouble. If more searchers came, Mother could use her good German and try to divert them.

I was afraid to remain alone and feared losing her, as well, but something had to be tried. Always I have to get over, to understand, to restrain myself and to learn to face things. Cautiously, Mother extracted herself from her hiding place and left the cellar, and I spent the rest of the day there alone, huddled up as before, and fear lay beside me as before. Yet I had a glimmer of hope—Mother was guarding me. Further waves of searchers came and went, never letting up. Through the floorboards I heard my mother's seemingly calm voice explain politely and directly, "No, there are no children in this house, the other people preferred to join their relatives in the next house over."

All around, the hellish Aktion continued. Wave after wave, punctuated by short silences, would break anew, sending through the window the sound of energetic marching, heart-rending screams, vigorous cursing in German or Ukrainian, and the broken cries of mothers having their children wrenched from their bosoms. In a strange and inexplicable way, because of the window at street level, it was as if I were physically in the midst of the whirlpool outside. Again and again I heard the groans of their futile struggle, cries that were suddenly cut off, frighteningly, for no clear reason. These voices outside, together with unending anxiety, remain in my memory as the essence of that day of terror.

All the doors and windows were open to avoid suspicion. Although I could only listen, Mother could peer out from deep within the flat to see what was happening. What did she see? Where did she get the strength to watch? Did she clasp her long fingers together? Bite her lips? Did she stand or sit? She never told me, nor did we ever again have much chance to talk about it. All day, she never came to visit me even once. I believe that one time only did

she call to me from a distance, perhaps from the yard, to give me a word of encouragement.

And during all that time, to hope and pray that the next wave would not reach me, that the day would end already, that they would stop looking here; yet this day was especially long, refusing to come to an end.

However, they never came down to the cellar again. A few days later, when it became possible to look, I found a chalk mark on the doorjamb. And so the means of my deliverance that day had been a chalk mark on the door, and the angels of death without a flashlight in their hands.

Yes, I had prayed that day. I made the prayers up myself, using a special pattern, praying them in a specific order that I did my best to repeat conscientiously: I had begun saying these prayers before this, perhaps during my sister's illness; they reached their highest pitch later, in a far-off village. I murmured them faithfully, obsessively, and they gave me a certain measure of comfort.

Evening came at last; night arrived. A heavy silence descended everywhere. At nightfall the Germans seemed to disappear, and people began carefully to leave their holes. Like bound captives groping to feel their limbs, everyone began asking around, finding out what had happened, who had been taken.

The calamity was horrible, inconceivable. Names began circulating from all sides—hundreds and hundreds of ghetto children and old persons had been removed, as many as they could lay hands on. Children were torn from their mothers' arms, clawing and wailing. The Germans had not refrained from the use of brute force; had availed themselves of whips and dogs; they had spared no one.

How fortunate we were—no one in our household was harmed. Mina and her nanny hid in a small chamber with a camouflaged door; Rayah's parents stayed in the Gafanovitsches' dirt cellar in the yard; one child in the other wing of the house lay all day under some blankets piled with seeming carelessness on a bed without being seen. By contrast, the children from the house next door were all taken, including the toddler Yankele. Even a year and more later, their father Leizer—I was living with him then—was still mourning, moaning at night, refusing to be comforted. And what happened to my various friends, those my age? That night, I had no way of knowing.

And as many as the children taken, so were the number of stories about how they were taken and their struggles, their efforts to escape, to beg, to plead for life—all in vain. The search of the houses had been thorough and complete—they were ransacked remorselessly. And even though most efforts to hide were unsuccessful, it was hard to understand those who had waited in their houses, as if paralyzed by shock, not even attempting to hide, while their children were collected like abandoned eggs. The lesson of my mother's deeds is with me always—take action, do not wait around, and do not just ape the behavior of the crowd.

What was next? What would happen tomorrow? Were the calamities over, or would they continue? It was good that my little sister was no longer here. She still has a chance of surviving. It was said that they transported the children in buses with windows shut with wire and painted white. Some remembered seeing vehicles like these several days before, parked in the outskirts of the city. Someone else knew enough to add that the children were transferred to a train waiting for them on a side track. And where did the train go?

To this day when I see a long line of empty buses along a street, my heart sinks.

Meanwhile, we had to be ready for anything, even at night. Accordingly, Mina and I were fitted out with a single bed that had been widened by laying a door atop it. This improvised bed was set next to the entrance to the little room, whose camouflaged door had this day passed the test. Were something to happen during the night, we could slip quickly into the room. Everyone in the household looked for ways to help us—adding a blanket, straightening the sheets; I could feel the care and concern focused on us from all around. Fully clothed and shod, ready to jump up at any moment, we lay down together to sleep. But in the end, not only was I hard put to fall asleep beside Mineleh, but I also permitted myself, even in this dire time, to imagine myself—I even tried it, a little—hugging Mina in her sleep. For some time I had been looking for ways to draw her attention to my feelings, without daring; what is more, I hoped she would show signs of returning my affection in some way. Surrealistic madness which now, when I recall it even after all these years, embarrasses me greatly.

Even after these days had ended and half a year had gone by, and I was wandering about like a stray dog in the liberated city—even then, my fantasies focused in part on the possibility that Mineleh had, like me, survived. I imagined with what excitement we would meet one another again, the two of us all alone but for one another; our hands clasp and never let go; we remain together for the rest of our lives, like brother and sister, like a pair of lovers, forever.

Tuesday

Morning came, and there was no need to wake us. At the crack of dawn we heard the sound of a motor and immediately we leapt into our hiding places. Mother hesitated—should we go back to the cellar, which was so easy to enter and search, or should we hide in the little room of our neighbor daughter, which had proved itself only yesterday. Mina and her nanny, who had been in the little room yesterday, went to the Gafanovitsches' shelter in the yard, while Rayah's parents, who had been in that shelter yesterday, went somewhere else. There wasn't much time to make up our minds, and in an instant, Mother decided upon the little room and even joined me there. Why did she come in with me, when it was clear that this time we would have to stay there all day at least, with no chance of leaving in the middle as she had the day before? Apparently, she did not want to leave me alone again for so many hours. Moreover, Rayah, who spoke German, decided this time that she would stay in the flat and be the one to meet the Germans. It strikes me that Mother may have preferred to stay with me as a means of avoiding the difficult hours that awaited her had she stayed outside the hiding place. Did she perhaps feel an instinctive need to be with me, like a bird with its chick in the hour of danger, in case, God forbid, these might be our last hours together? I had never dared raise these thoughts until I wrote these words.

I rushed into the little room. We probably took some food with us, too, bread and jam to last through the day, and already they had shoved the large, four-door cupboard over the opening to hide it, and we were alone. The room was very small—it was Rayah's, apparently—and had a good chance of being overlooked, especially since it stood next to the rooms in the other wing of the building, so that its window, which we were careful to keep open into the

street, could easily be mistaken as belonging to the other entrance. Inside the room, to the left of the door, was a bed; beside it stood a two-doored armoire with its back toward the outer wall of the house, next to the window facing the street. We spent most of the day here, each of us crammed and folded in one half of the armoire, whose doors, like the window, were either wide open, or perhaps the armoire had no doors, only curtains—I spent a whole long day in or beside it, yet I remember almost nothing about it.

If I try to compare the feelings of dread of those two days, the day before and this one, the second day was harder. On the first day, before we knew what was happening, the terror was instinctive. On the second day we went into hiding much better informed—and anxious. The Germans, too, knew more—most of the ghetto's children and old folk had fallen into their hands the first day; as they started the second day, they had a good estimate of how many they were missing, and accordingly they returned with redoubled rigor to complete their mission. Once more they came through, this time more thoroughly and systematically, wave after wave, from house to house and room to room; with them were more Ukrainians, and some said some Latvians as well.

While we were still getting settled in the little room and there was no movement around us yet, I heard the noise of engines from far off. For the only time that day, I dared raise my head and peep out of the window. I saw a convoy of three or four military vehicles covered with tarpaulins, slowly proceeding down Varniu Street. With a stifled cry, perhaps my only one during those two days, almost fainting and choked by terror, I began burrowing further and further inward, down into the depths of the farthest corner under the bed, curling up into the darkest crack there.

To hide, to disappear. As at summer camp during thunder and lightning storms; as once under my grandfather's bed when he caught me one holiday wearing flashlights on the buttons of my best clothes, or after my errant Sabbath ride on the peasant's wagon in the village square. Just so I ran, breathlessly, some months later, between the lines of fire at the front in a field being sliced by bursts of gunfire; just so when escaping from Russian patrol dogs between mounds of snow in a thick forest; just so while the Egyptians were bombing Tel Aviv four years later, my blood freezing in my veins, without

further thought I ran down and further down, to my great shame, abandoning my uncle, who was recovering from a leg amputation. To escape, to get away, trying to survive.

Mother, from her place, tried to calm me a little, to boost my spirits—but to no avail. Much time passed before my body stopped shaking and I dared move a little from my hole in the corner, to crawl like a half-paralyzed animal out of the bed area that sheltered me, to hide in my half of the armoire on the side that was farthest from the window.

The window was open, and the noises in the street washed over us without hindrance, much louder than the sounds that had penetrated to the depths of the cellar the day before. Waves of shouts, orders, speech, and screams sometimes made it seem as if the armoire we were in was standing in the middle of the street, and for some reason no one had seen it yet.

From time to time Mother had the courage to peep furtively through the window. I preferred to stay curled up and seated most of the time, with my eyes shut. Even so, at times we exchanged whispers or chewed on something. Then we heard them coming. Footsteps sounded in the different rooms, furniture creaked; there were sounds of beds being overturned, furniture being shaken. They were in our flat, searching it and getting closer to us. Through the partition of the wall I heard their voices as if we were trapped in a mine under an avalanche of rock, hearing the diggers approach us—although here it was a death squad making its way toward us.

To shrink down, to become smaller still; like a mouse, like a ladybird beetle. Striving to be an entity no larger than a point, a nullity. Only the pounding heart to tell, only the held breath to betray us. Again the eyes shut tightly, the teeth clatter as in a dead man's skull, the brain dry of all thought. Only to pray without ceasing, to beg of the supreme power of the universe that a miracle might happen, that the threat about to materialize any instant be thwarted before it overwhelms you like molten lava, like a siren, like a whirlpool in the river.

At a certain point they turned to the cupboard that hid the opening to our little room. I heard them checking inside it, then trying to move it without success. Then came combing sounds from the space between the cupboard and the wall, scratching sounds. Though apparently weak, they reached me with

unbearable loudness; the room seemed flooded with light as strong as that of the burning bush—it was unbearable. The point of a bayonet scratched lightly at the wooden door of our room—then they turned and went away. At that moment I could define what stood between me and my destruction in precise units of measurement, the several millimeters of thickness in a door slat, within hearing of a single scratch.

My friend Danke hid in an attic in the Komitāt's labor office, perhaps thanks to his brother the Komitāt's errand boy, an *Eilbote*. When the Germans arrived—they searched there, too—and raised the hatch to the attic in the hall ceiling, Danke leapt straight down onto the shoulders of the German below him, almost knocking him down, and fled outside. Wherever he hid next, they failed to find him. Judith, a friend from early childhood who used to get me to be a doctor and give shots to her doll, was hidden by her aunt on the first day of the Aktion in a Jewish police office in her quarter of the ghetto. She crawled under the desk which stood there in the middle of the room, curling up in the space where one's legs go, which luckily for her was hidden by the front of the desk. When the Germans looked in through the half-open doorway, they didn't see a thing. On the second day she was brought to the workshops where her uncle worked. When the search parties reached this place, too, she was hidden in a closet where they hung work overalls. She was small, and the bayonet that they stuck into the clothes went over her head. She is now the mother of five strong sons; she told me her story, which her children have never heard, in juicy Yiddish studded with homely expressions the like of which I've never again heard.

The Germans were not stupid in their search—rather, by that hour of the day, the hunters had perhaps grown tired. The continual struggle with smitten mothers, with children fighting for their lives, seemed to have dulled their sword-sharp alertness. It is not merely lip service to say that, thanks perhaps to those who were carried to their death, some of us survivors remained alive. Two of my friends, brothers who lived up Grinius Street, once invited me in front of their house to go on a wonderful adventure. They blindfolded me, stood me on a board, and slowly began lifting me up, gently swaying, while whispering hypnotically to me, saying that I was soaring through the sky,

sailing among stars. I was overcome with dizziness, I begged them to put me back on the ground.

Now, so I was told, they begged not to be loaded onto the truck as it stood in front of their house. But their pleas went unheeded; although the boys tried to resist and clung to the doorway, they were hoisted by force and taken away.

And as for me—it seems to me that even today I can hear the kind of wail that would have escaped my lips had I been caught. Sometimes it comes back and haunts me during nights of bad dreams.

I remember little of the rest of that day, even less than I remember of the day before—only the hazy traces of a long, a very long day that wouldn't end. Because there were not many children left in the ghetto to trap in the first place, and because those who remained were well hidden, it took a long time for the Germans to conduct a meticulous search for them. For this reason, apparently, there were long, nerve-racking pauses between the waves of searches, pauses that became part of the looming terror of that day.

For it was a day of waiting, mostly—if only the hours would melt and fall away, exhausted as we were, into the evening dusk. Such was the thrust of some of my prayers that day—I remember this part well—not only for immediate salvation, but for a quick end to a long and difficult day. Foolish innocence, that—to suppose that night would bring us some relief, that the next day would be any better.

The few children that were hunted down that day, it is said, were not sent out on trains, but were taken to somewhere nearby—perhaps to the Ninth Fort, and this was true of others captured during the coming days.

On one of those days, Mother told me of other moments of dread that she had during the second Aktion day of the Kinder Aktion, which she didn't mention earlier. At a certain moment she had looked out the open window and, to her surprise, her gaze met that of a German officer who happened to be going by the house. Losing her control for an instant, she sprang back in fright. Immediately afterward, she heard him turn into the path that circled our house and come inside. For a long while he poked through the flat without discovering either the meaning of Mother's frightened look or her whereabouts. It was extraordinarily lucky that he saw Rayah, which perhaps

abated his suspicions. And Mother, who understood perfectly why he circled the house, kept the knowledge in her heart and said nothing to me at the time. The day gave way at last to evening. With dusk, the sounds of activity died down and, as on the day before, we gradually began crawling out of our shelters, not believing it was over.

We were still stretching our limbs and exchanging our first words with one another when we suddenly heard a vehicle racing through the streets—they were coming back! Was it a sly trick designed to surprise those in hiding as they emerged? I was quickly sent, to my great relief, to Grandmother Gafanovitsch's hiding place; I didn't want to go back to the little room. In a deep pit, I now discovered the riddle of our neighbors' shelter, a secret kept until now among the members of their family: a dry well in the back yard near the door of their house, its opening hidden by thick boards overlaid by bricks. On top of these they had added, as if carelessly, firewood and perhaps a laundry heating range. We descended into the well by means of a long ladder, with a stool at the bottom for the grandmother. Beside it, on a blanket, there was room for another child or two. Here was where Mina had stayed all day, and now I joined them, too. The place was deep and sealed off, close and moist, as if we were under a good warm quilt. Here it was almost impossible to hear what was going on outside, which was an enormous relief. I felt as if the floor of the pit wasn't far from the river and drew some of its peace from the river's waters. We sat here for several hours while nothing happened.

We were not alone—Mrs. Gafanovitsch's sons did not forget her, and would occasionally send her words of encouragement through the piles of junk. The look on the grandmother's apparently calm face—she never stopped knitting even for an instant, whether in the dark or by the light of a weak candle—was soothing and comforting, in direct contrast to the tremendous tension of being all day in the little room above ground. A calm came over me; I had felt nothing like it for two full days at least. How different those days would have been, I thought to myself, without sounds coming in from outside; I wished I could stay forever in this womb, breathing peace like this.

When we emerged, we discovered that the sudden return of the Germans was brought about by a tip that had led them straight to a nearby pharmacy. There, behind an apparently sealed wall, tens of children and adults had

spent two days in a large shelter. Now, at precisely the last instant before their salvation, the destroyer descended upon them all, adults and children alike. One of them who tried to escape was shot on the spot.

Wednesday

That night I slept at the Gafanovitsches', near the well. At dawn we re-entered the shelter—Mina, the grandmother, and I—and stayed there all day. Nothing special happened near us, but I know the Germans came back to the ghetto that day. After discovering the hidden shelter in the pharmacy the night before, they concentrated today on searching certain locations, this time using trained bloodhounds. And so a string of hidden and well-camouflaged shelters that had stood up under the searches of the previous two days were uncovered on the third day of the Aktion. They took away the children and blew up the shelters. The dull sounds of explosions reached us even in the depths of the well.

And that was the end of the cleverly hidden *malinas*, most of which were discovered through tip-offs. There were wretched parents who gave away likely locations in return for the vain promise that their child would be returned to them. There was also a story about a former Jewish policeman who pointed out certain houses.

And there was a mother who covered her crying baby daughter's mouth when Germans were heard close to the shelter's opening; when the danger had passed, the baby was no longer alive.

After only a few days, when my mother let me out of the house for a little exercise—at twilight, and dressed in long adult clothes—I headed right away to nearby places where shelters had been blown up. In amazement I gawked at the destroyed houses or plots of mortared land from which poked lumps of concrete, blankets, and linens—the last evidence of life that had ended, of children who were no longer there; and I had had no idea that the shelters had been there.

During the coming days, in the face of mounting rumors about the imminent destruction of the ghetto, many still preferred to prepare shelters. Even my mother, from what I was told, stayed for a while in Dr. Golach's hiding place. When I heard this I remembered how I once met the youngest Golach boy

while I was carrying a stick or a rod of some sort. He asked me for it—saying he was building a heating stove. Now I understood what it meant.

In the end, when the Germans came to destroy the ghetto in earnest, having learned from the children's Aktion about our *malinas*, they brought a special engineering platoon, accompanied by Special Police and S. S. forces from Vienna, Riga, and Hungary, to carry out the work of demolishing the ghetto. They went from house to house, exploding and burning each of them, sparing none. A municipal Lithuanian firefighters unit was also involved in the effort. So it seems that the Aktion against children—the *Kinder Aktion* — encoded and prefigured the manner of the ghetto's destruction.

The Coming Days

The rest of the days of that week were very hazy. I don't remember much about them.

The Aktion was seemingly over on Wednesday. Above the ghetto and among the houses a great lament remained, frozen and unheard. People moved about in a mixture of hysteria and apathy, shocked and beaten. How did parents handle the blow, or loving children deal with the removal of their elderly parents? What did surviving family members do with the toys, the clothes? I am never able to think too long about this, let alone understand. People were paralyzed by pain and sorrow, and no one went to visit. Not a few insisted on believing that their children were still alive, merely removed to another camp—anything else was unthinkable. And the rapid advances of the Red Army, which took place precisely during this time, were now pointless and incapable of providing encouragement.

Events came thick and fast during the *Kinder Aktion*. We learned about them gradually, or perhaps we were capable of digesting them only slowly. Thus, on Monday when the Aktion began, the Jewish police force was ordered to muster in their best uniforms for a joint air-raid drill with the German units—"so as not to be a disgrace," they were told. They showed up, about 140 strong. After a rigorous inspection, they were marched, left-right left-right, into trucks that transported them straight to the Ninth Fort. There, some of them were executed that very day, perhaps to prevent an uprising of the Jewish police like the one that occurred during the Aktion against the Vilno ghetto.

The officers were investigated and cruelly tortured—they were required to disclose the location of hiding places, without being told of the Aktion taking place at the same time in our ghetto. Afterwards, we heard of the bravery and revolt among those who were executed, together with acts of debasement and betrayal on the part of a few policemen. Ninety of the policemen remained alive and, after a few days, were returned to the ghetto. The same Monday, members of the Altestenrat were also taken to the Ninth Fort. In this way, the Germans prevented any possible formation of organized resistance. And Motele, the baby—the child of the young family that was placed in our room during the winter, whose parents decided after many hesitations to deliver him to the peasant friend of the family—his mother had finally regretted the decision, her heart broken until they returned her baby to her— he too was taken in the Aktion.

Once again, the ghetto was not as it was before. Without children, without the Altestenrat, without the Jewish police force—which was abolished—the ghetto took on the well-known form of the concentration camps in Germany. The area of the ghetto was reduced yet again: everyone who lived on the other side of Varniu Street was ordered to move. The trap narrowed; the sand in the hourglass was running out. Among the people who had escaped recently, the flight of the Altestenrat secretary stood out.

Not much time remained for the ghetto to hurt and to mourn—only about a hundred and ten days more. The ghetto was torn down and its people were moved west. Another six to nine months of concentration camps and gradual death awaited them; only a small number would survive. Perhaps fate was being kind to the bereaved parents who perished after the Kinder Aktion.

Years later, while I was writing my thesis on viniculture under the desert-like conditions of the Aravah, I came across an article in the semiannual proceedings of the American Horticultural Society. It was by J.P. Kenworthy, who described the following experiment: on March 27 and 28, 1944, he went through the vineyard and nipped the buds of all the young grape shoots to measure the influence of this action on the level of minerals in the new leaves. I was struck by the curious fact that, ironically, on the very days of the Aktion, the scientist Kenworthy was eliminating young buds in the sun-filled Imperial

Valley in California, precisely at that time. This is how things often are with me—every year on the calendar I cross horizontal and vertical grids, stumbling at parallel dates to the events of those years. I never stop comparing and matching.

Intermediate Epilogue: A Follow-up

The Aktion against children did not in fact ever stop. As the days went by, either through planned forays or whenever a lone child was spotted, he was immediately pounced upon and taken away. Never before had the Germans pointed to members of a certain age group, except for the very old, saying: you must all die; none among you shall live. So there was in the Aktion against children a kind of total, unequivocal decree denying Jewish children the right to exist.

Who were the children who died there? How much life force was cut down during those few days? (Had they not all probably prayed, even as I did?)

With the help of an expert in statistics and demography of Eastern European Jews, I once tried to measure the relative rate of survival among children in our ghetto.

According to his estimates, there were 5,060 Jewish children under the age of 15 in our city before the war.

—Of these, I reckoned that about 150 survived.

—Therefore, about 4,910 perished.

Those who remained alive thus amount to about 2.9 percent.

—About three in every hundred.

And I am one of those three.

Intermediate Epilogue: Arke and Maimke

For years I thought that Arke and Maimke were taken during those days, because all the children were collected at the same time even in the satellite work camps where they were staying. They say the Germans enticed the children with candy and, pretending to play a game, tied their hands and took them out of the ghetto that way. When their parents came home from their work, they found no one there. Lately, I have discovered that the two boys made it through that day unharmed. Arke was working with the adults;

Maimke, the younger of the two, had stayed in the camp because he had a cold. He was saved by the man in charge, who was fond of him both because of his infectious mischief and because his son and Arke were friends. Accordingly, he hid them together in the morning in a tool cabinet and they were saved.

From Ruchama I first learned that my friends survived the Kinder Aktion, and that when the ghetto was wiped out, were sent west with the men. Details of the event remained wrapped in mystery: when, after the selection, she and her two sons were left on the train platform in Stutthof, Prussia —just so I might have stood there, with my mother—they suddenly heard a sharp cry behind them, coming from the cars into which the men had been loaded. "Kaplaniukes!" someone unfamiliar shouted to them, "Come here quick!" Arke and Maimke, whose last name was Kaplan, got up, left their mother, and, at the very last moment, jumped on the train as it started its long journey. To this day Ruchama wonders who the voice belonged to, and has no idea who it could have been. The cars were already closed, if not locked, and she did not see the man's face. Like the rest of the women from our ghetto, she was left in the concentration camp near Stutthof, where she was liberated with the last few survivors.

And the children—131 of them—were moved, several weeks after they arrived, to Landsberg, to a satellite camp ("Lager 1") of the Dachau camp network. There a selection took place, and the younger children were sent to Auschwitz. I discovered this from Daniel, son of a well-known Polish author whose family came as refugees to our city just before the war. Daniel was one of two who managed to jump from the train on its way to Auschwitz, and the only one to do it unharmed—the other boy hit a telegraph pole. Daniel knew Polish and was able to wander for many months among country people, and thus he was saved. Among other things, he and the peasant he was with supplied hay to the Auschwitz camps.

Ruchama was fated to remain alive only because her children were separated from her; otherwise, during the next selection, she would have been sent with the other women and children to the other side.

Nor is this the end of the story. On the first day of Passover one year, I drove my father to visit one of his elderly friends on a kibbutz in the west Negev. On

the way, I told him what I had heard from Ruchama about the fate of her children. Father smiled as if he were revealing a secret—it was he, it turned out, who had told Ruchama what she knew. He had been in Dachau Satellite Lager 2, where he happened to meet the two boys' uncle, who told him that the boys had been with him at first, and were later taken elsewhere.—Since they were separated for deportation to Auschwitz, the fact was kept from him for several days; he was told the children were ill and had been taken to another camp.

"I can add something else," Father suddenly said, "something I haven't told anyone since I found out." In Auschwitz, he went on, they had taken the boys, as usual, to a rope stretched out at a certain height. Everyone who passed under it had his number taken down. Our boys took the initiative, organized a group of delegates to accost the man in charge of them, the Uberkapo Albert, with a suggestion and a plea—they would work very hard, with all their might, even harder than the boys who were taller than they, if only he would cancel the expected decree to deport them and leave them here. The Kapo laughed good-naturedly—so the story goes—and even went so far as to clap one of them amiably on the shoulder, and answered to this effect—I'm sorry, my children, (sic – *meine kinder*) *aber ein Gesetz ist ein Gesetz*— but a law is a law. And so it was that a few days later, the children were gone.

Ever since he heard this, said my father, he had wanted to write about it. He had wanted to call his story "The Delegation", but hadn't felt up to writing it; perhaps he would still do so one day. I only thought, wryly, that if a delegation had been appointed, Arke was certain to have been one of its members. A kind of calm came over me, I as if suddenly my affiliation had become clearer for me – I am in fact the 132nd child of this group.

I did not rest with this knowledge. A few years later I found out that the twenty or so survivors of the group of 131 held a reunion every 4th of May, the day of their liberation. This time I came too. With obsessive solemnity they sank into the repetitive, never-ending discussion, over the reasons that they were not sent straight to the crematoria, but were rather left to live on for several months in the camp. Their reasons were: mistakes in the Germans' schedule of execution; or the fact that thousands of Gypsies and Hungarian Jews were in line before them; but mainly they emphasized the impressive display they

made upon entering Auschwitz—at the urging of one of the grown-ups among them, they arranged themselves for a march in neat rows, left-right, left-right; and when they saw the Germans one of them let cry, "*Mitzen ab!*" (hats off!). It is this, most agreed, that tipped the scale in their favor.

I began asking questions. No, none of them remembered Arke and Maimke, but in Auschwitz they underwent two selections, at the end of which only 31 remained. During the first selection (on the Jewish New Year), the Germans went through with a stick of a certain height, recording the numbers of any who were shorter than the stick (a few managed to survive this selection by inserting cloth and stones in their shoes). The main selection, which took place on Yom Kippur of all days, was conducted by Mengele himself: they were all ordered to strip and stand naked in rows, their arms stretched out at their sides, so that Satan's eldest son could pass among them and identify which of them still had hairless genitals and armpits. These he ordered to leave the ranks and station themselves in front of the recording officer (*ein Gesetz ist ein Gesetz*); all those disappeared the next day. A short boy among the survivors, who is short to this day, told me how, in a moment of courage and resourcefulness, he had been able to save himself. At the end of the second selection, the taller boys were sent naked to their shacks, while those waiting to have their numbers recorded were pulling up their trousers. Yankele suddenly straightened up, cast off his trousers, and ran naked with the others to the barracks—and to life.

As for the story of the "delegation" that Father tells—he hadn't heard of it. However, he remembered a nine-year-old boy who, at the end of the selection, ran about offering his ration of bread to anyone who would change places with him.

Danke visited Auschwitz recently, and brought from the archives a detailed list of a "transport of children from the Kovno ghetto, 1 Aug. 44"—with an explicit note: "two killed on the way". There are 129 rows on the list. On each row is the number tattooed on the arm, and sometimes the name of the child beside it, the name of his father, and his date of birth. And in that list—black on white—I found the names of my friends, Arke and Maimke. So that everything is correct, lawfully recorded. *Ein Gesetz ist ein Gesetz*.

Escape

On that morning I didn't want to leave at all. I really didn't want to go that morning. In fact, I didn't want to go at all.

But I had to.

When we got dressed, it was still completely dark outside. We grabbed something to eat and out the door we went. This time we took the narrow lane between our house and the one parallel to it, along Grinius Street. Perhaps Mother thought this would draw less attention to us, or slightly shorten our way to the riverbank. It was from this path that, two weeks earlier, the German officer had entered our house.

We left quietly so as not to waken others in the house and without having said good-bye to anybody the night before. I wore a long black man's coat, long riding pants (a *galifeh*), a large cap pulled down over my face, with a large muffler around my neck. This was my second attempt this week to join Mother's brigade. The time before, I was already standing in the lines when I was given a signal to leave immediately—the dangerous guard officer had appeared unexpectedly.

This is only the fourth or fifth sentence that I have written at the moment, and already the strong urge to sleep comes over me, so familiar from writing earlier pages. I was sleepy then, too; somewhat groggy from interrupted sleep, turmoil, and tension, trailing along after Mother without too much joy, tending in fact to play the grump. There was no hint this time of my proud gait on that other dawn, some years before, when I walked with Mother to the station for a bus ride outside the city. The possibility that today I would succeed in slipping out of the ghetto seemed remote to me – I did not believe it would happen.

A few days before, around sunset, and for the first time since the *Kinder Aktion*, I ventured a long way from the house. Camouflaged then as I was now, and with great care—German patrols continued to police the ghetto—I went to the gate facing the river at the end of Varniu Street and waited there for Mother, to watch her brigade coming home from work. By that time,

Mother had already made her arrangements outside, and had spoken with a gentile woman who, in return for a considerable weekly sum, was willing to hide me in her house. Now I had to be taken out as soon as possible. The route Mother's brigade took seemed made to order for this purpose—the rowboats anchored on the opposite bank, not far from the woman's house. While I was waiting for Mother, a friend of the family came and stood near me, the painter Ya'akov Lifschitz. He, too, was waiting for someone.

I was only a child, after all, and so in violation of all rules of prudence I said—one of these days I might be over there, and I pointed to the houses on the slope of the Green Hill, opposite us. Lifschitz smiled sadly. While we were standing there talking, we heard a loud and bitter voice behind us; two women were sitting there on a stone or a mound of earth. One of them was saying to her friend, in a grieving and plaintive voice that she made no effort to disguise: "My Chaimke is no longer alive—why is that boy still here?" I saw clearly that I could not stay here any more.

That morning we left—a gray dawn had already broken, and we were still in the narrow alley between the houses when a puppy came running after us. A puppy in the ghetto? Surprised, I stooped to pet it as we hurried along; it responded by wagging its tail. Keeping a pet had been officially outlawed ever since all the dogs and cats in the ghetto had been destroyed, but from time to time an animal like this would slip through the barbed wire fence and immediately find a warm welcome with someone. I hadn't had a dog since Belka disappeared. My heart sank—did I have to leave today of all days? Had the puppy come straight from the other side of the fence. Or, what was more likely, did it belong to one of the children who had been missing for two weeks now, and was it still looking for his master? I wanted it very much. I suggested that Mother wait a moment so I could take the pup back and shut it in our room—that way, if I failed to get away this morning, too, at least a puppy would be waiting for me at home. I was a child, and a worse possibility than that I might be retracing my steps in a short while apparently never entered my mind.

As could be expected, Mother did not countenance my vagaries at the time. It is easy to imagine how heavy of heart she was that morning. I didn't give up, however. For the rest of our walk through the gate, I played with the amusing

thought that if my escape fell through again this morning, the pup might still be hanging around the house when I returned. It was apparently so important a matter to me that during the next few days, with all their upheavals and dangers, the question continued to preoccupy me—would I have found the puppy if I had gone back home that day?

We lined up in rows. I was in the middle of the inner row; Mother was beside me. We heard an order, and the lines moved forward. With officious noise, and with no interference from the guards standing to one side, as at least as long as the German officer was absent, our people conducted their own rituals of giving orders and reporting. It was apparent that there was an understanding between the brigade workers and the guards, thanks to the steady bribes that came their way.

The body tense and alert, head bowed, empty of all thought. Without a word being said to them, people walked close on either side of me, preventing any surprises. A few steps more, without any further inspection, and we had already made it to the bank of the river; there a few rowboats were waiting, bobbing in the shallow water as at summer camp. They divided the passengers among the boats; Mother and me were in the first one. A few minutes later, and the boat was pushed out into the deep water.

Mist rises from the water; the boat begins moving, pointing itself in a certain direction. One bank recedes and falls away, the other comes closer. Is a Lithuanian paddling the boat, or are our people helping? I don't dare look.

Vistas open up, views that are not of this world. The river seems to me endlessly wide. I hear the thin splash of oars, and people talking in whispers. I see no Germans; perhaps they have stayed on shore with the other half of the brigade. All is quiet; it is spring, and I have not seen the river from up close like this for years. Is this how things have been, then, only a few minutes from the ghetto, for the whole of the last three years? To get up, to raise a sail, to strain, flex muscles and start rowing, to get as far away as may be.

Softly spoken words in Hebrew caught my attention: "You have to remove his patch," a wife says to her husband, with reference to another child that was also being smuggled out in their own boat. I imitated them, and before long we were at the other bank. Many people stood in a bunch there, as if waiting for the riverboat to take them back in the other direction. They were

Lithuanians waiting for the brigade, ready to conduct hasty business with them until the other half of the brigade arrived. I had time to marvel at how openly they went about it—look, see how little the Lithuanians dreaded the Germans, how free of fear they were.

As the bank drew closer, so my anxiety grew. Mother soothed me—contrary to my fears, the presence of so many Lithuanians was a good sign. Mother's instructions were clear—to stand up, get out of the boat, and go straight through the waiting crowd, looking neither right nor left. While people were getting into lines, more or less, I was to go forward without hesitating, go past those gathered there, cross the street, and turn into the path leading into the hills just across from us. There, after several minutes of slow walking, a blonde woman would join me and tell me where to go.

The prow of the boat hit the shore. My heart pounded like drums, and my eyes were dark veils. Moist gravel was under my feet. Seeing but unseen, I left the people, not looking behind me I went by and approached the street. No Germans to be seen, thank God. The road across looked empty, too. I started up this path, getting farther and farther away.

I walked on as if in a dream, going deeper into the gorge. Though I had no idea what the next moment would bring or where my steps were taking me, I was soon engulfed in the green slopes, and tall trees stood all around, holding crowns of deep purple; my eyes were unused to the sight. An immense joy began swelling in my breast—I had not seen such sights for years, the trees so tall, such abundant the greenery; my mother had not prepared me for this at all.

I kept going and no one came toward me or caught up with me from behind. I began to worry—had we considered this possibility? I had no address and no name. What was I supposed to do if no one met me? Should I retrace my steps and join the brigade as it trod to the factory? And what would I do there? I did not recall that we had ever discussed such a situation. In the meantime, a figure approached me. Her face revealed nothing, and I was filled with dread at my first encounter with a strange person. I averted my gaze and held my breath as I passed her, when suddenly she said, in Lithuanian, "Keep going and turn into the second gate on your right; I'll catch up in a bit." Doing as I was told, I discovered a wooden gate covered by vines with a broken

mailbox lying on its side. A steep path rose from the gate. When I was halfway up the slope, after a slow climb, the woman caught up with me and directed me behind a little house on the top of the hill.

On The Green Hill

Marija Grinceviciene was an elderly widow whose only son had been jailed for theft. We didn't talk much about it for many days because she was ashamed of it. It occurs to me that her son is probably still alive. He might know the identity of the blonde woman who led me to the place.

The blonde woman introduced me to the old lady, and both of them listened to me attentively, all the while nodding their heads and expressing sorrow and disbelief over the cruelty of the Germans toward the Jews in the ghetto in general, and over the *Aktionen* against children in particular.

They tried calming me—you're safe here, there's nothing to worry about now; before long the Russians will be here and the villains will get their just deserts. They fed me a thick slice of fresh bread and butter and gave me a hot drink. A great fatigue settled over me, as though I had not slept for many days. The old lady offered me her bed, as she might to a proper guest, and the blonde woman went to work in the factory to tell my mother that I had arrived safely. Surrounded by icons of the Virgin Mary and other saints, I fell into a deep sleep, unable to believe that I was at last outside the ghetto.

My memories from that day of April 12, 1944, are of two distinct kinds. Clear as crystal, I remember every second of the first hours of the day—our early rising, the puppy, crossing the river, trudging into the unknown by way of the green path; but from the moment I entered Maria's house, all seems shrouded in darkness. How did I feel? What did I do all day? Where did I sit? What did I look at? I do, however, clearly recall the next day's dawn after my first night's sleep. A deep hush to which I was not accustomed, mixed with a faint light that filtered through fine curtains like those we once had in our old house; the light was unlike any I had ever seen. The barking of a few dogs, and scattered voices of a different kind here and there, all at a different volume.

During the coming nights the Lithuanian woman continued to have me sleep in her bed while she herself slept in a makeshift bed in the middle of the room. There was another bed to the right of the table under the window; perhaps it had belonged to her late husband, and no one slept in it now. We never talked about him. It may also have been a clever ruse, not to keep linen on two beds.

If someone should visit by surprise, she could quickly gather the sheets from the floor and stuff them into the closets, leaving no sign of anyone else in her house.

And indeed, as soon as I arrived we began speaking of safety measures. I was instructed to be very careful, to stay out of the yard and the street, to stay away from the window, and to keep my voice down. If we heard footsteps or saw someone through the window, I was to dash into the clothes closet, of which had had its half shelving removed to make room for me. This would be my temporary hiding place until the pit under the kitchen floor was finished, the digging of which she had already begun, perhaps with the help of the blonde woman's husband. They also considered digging an alternate hiding place in the yard, but excavation was more difficult there, and hard to hide from the neighbors. Most of my instructions were delivered in a firm, authoritative tone by the blonde neighbor, perhaps because my hiding here was her doing, perhaps because she was the younger of the two and more attuned to everyday reality. I imagine they both thought they were dealing with an ordinary boy of eleven on whom they had to impress, in spite of himself, the importance of caution so as to prevent disaster.

So I had returned to Green Hill. In these environs Father had lived with Mottel's family; later, he and mother had lived here as a young couple. My earliest childhood memories were anchored here, in Italiu Street, in a wooden house with a front porch, and later in a storied house, also made of wood, I believe, where my friend Mossik began to be embedded in my memories.

The house was perfect for our purpose." Little Workers' Street" 59a was the last house in the lane, somewhat isolated from the others in the same row, as the letter in its street number showed; it was situated at the top of that part of the hill that overlooked the river. The lane itself, bordered by a number of scattered wooden houses, meandered unofficially in curves that joined Darbininku gatve - "Workers' Street", itself an extension of a thinly populated suburb on the northeastern edge of the city, in the direction of the river. No other house faced ours directly, which was a huge advantage for me. The house had another access from the river—the steep path I had taken to get there—a path that branched off from the lower way.

There were two adjacent dwellings in the wooden house. In the one on the northern side of the house, facing the lane, lived the blonde woman and her family. In the southern one, with its entrance from the yard, lived my landlady, the Lithuanian woman. This, too, was an advantage for me, because I could both see an approaching stranger through the window and hear his footsteps as he approached. The flat itself was small, containing a single living room with an entrance through a glassed-in porch. From the entrance, you turned left into a dark kitchen with a large, heavy, black stove. It had four or five openings above the flames that could be enlarged or reduced in size, by using metal rings that fitted one inside the other, reminding me of the kitchen in our house before the war. The stove was both for cooking and heating, and was fueled by wood logs stored in a small adjoining storeroom—during the third year of the war, it was hard to find coal. In the center of the kitchen was a large, thick-legged table; under it, covered by a carpet, were a number of sawn-off floor boards that camouflaged the pit where I was to hide.

The bathroom adjoined the living room, and I believe it served to store the large chamber pot that was emptied each morning into the outhouse, which stood in the back yard.

When I arrived, the pit was very small—apparently the good neighbors had only just begun digging it, and I could not squeeze inside. So during the evenings, I gradually began scooping away the thick clay on the pit's sides and bottom, widening and deepening it, with only a small degree of success.

The old lady carefully scattered the excavated soil about the yard at night. She spread a blanket in the bottom of the pit, and I was able, in the end, to sit hunched in the pit for an hour or more. It had none of the spaciousness of the Gafanovitsches' shelter—but I was here now, and these were the conditions. Fortunately for me, I seldom needed the shelter. I doubt in any case that it would have saved me during a careful search.

Marija had no relatives in the city, and only a few acquaintances, that came infrequently to visit. Every such visit, even when I knew about it in advance, was a major upheaval for me. I suppose that as long as I was there, she discouraged visitors. She tried to dismiss unforeseen guests as fast as possible, or would linger with them in the doorway without inviting them in.

When guests did arrive, I would dart into the closet, do my best to sit still, and listen patiently to the slow and tiresome conversation of the old woman and her friends. I prayed that the visit would soon be over. It was hard to remain calm when there were only a few steps and a thin board between me and a stranger. It was no less difficult to shake off the associations with previous periods of hiding. The closet was old, and it was all I could do to keep it from creaking with any small movement I made to scratch an arm or leg. I was also plagued by the fear that she might suddenly need something from the closet and that I was hiding there. When the days grew warmer and I had gained a little more confidence, I would slip into the darkened yard before her guests arrived and wait there until they left, gaze at the stars, listen attentively to the voices rising from the nearby houses, and try to imagine what was happening there.

Marija was a practicing Catholic—morning and evening she recited her prayers. There was tacit an understanding between us that she knew clearly just who had crucified Jesus, but under the circumstances, we avoided the embarrassing topic. For her part, she familiarized me with her prayer book and showed me how the beads of the rosary around her neck helped her recall them in the correct order. My interest in these details, as well as in the act of communion, was not merely academic—I took into account that I might need this knowledge in the days to come.

She was a simple and unfortunate woman. For years already, she had been living alone and in poverty. Her son was a petty criminal who had brought her little comfort. She was alert and had a store of life experience, but often preferred to rest in a wise silence. In return for hiding me, she demanded of Mother a large weekly sum, 250 Deutsche Marks , as I recall, most of which I suppose she spent on improving her son's conditions in prison. She visited him at regular intervals. Whether she told him how she came by her money, I do not know. To me she said that she told no one about it. We were together day and night for about ten weeks, but I remember no special conversations with her. And while it is true that she profited materially by hiding me, she was still a good-hearted woman for having agreed to hide a Jewish boy in the first place —only for a few weeks, they had told her. For her part, Mother hoped the Russians would soon arrive, thus sparing her the need to find another

shelter for me and making my placement in hiding affordable until then—no small gamble.

The key to my situation was in the Lithuanian lady's neighbors. They were the go-betweens and supporters, and without them I would not have been hidden. Because the blonde woman worked with Mother, she could send and receive daily greetings and letters, sometimes even small packages. On the first evening I was invited into their flat, and they took a great interest in what was happening with me. My words contained nothing new for them—because of their vantage point above the river and rumors in the city and factory, they already knew a lot. Along with their own fond feelings for us, the Jews, they had things to say about the harsh attitude of the Germans toward the Lithuanian population. Lithuanians in general were no longer as amiable towards the Germans as they had been during the first few years—jailings, executions, conscription into the army and the auxiliary corps were now their lot. They made no effort to conceal their fervent hope that the situation would soon change.

I saw before me a Lithuanian couple of the kind I had scarcely known existed: humane, and concerned for the persecuted merely because they were persecuted. The nature of their empathy indicated, in the impression I formed of them, that they were enlightened and educated, made of the same stuff as the conscientious members of the underground resistance movement, although I knew nothing of their jobs before the war or their political past. When I went back to see them after the liberation, they had already moved to new living quarters in a flat that formerly belonged to German officers, testifying perhaps to a certain connection with the new government. They were glad to see me then, and very pleased with the way things had turned out. I remember asking them, provocatively and perhaps unwisely, "And wouldn't you have preferred an independent Lithuanian state?" "No," they answered. I do not know if they meant it.

They had no children. Instead, they had adopted a girl, a war orphan, from the region of Minsk, one of the abandoned children that the Germans distributed at train stations to anyone who was interested. She was three or four years younger than I, with curly blond hair, a round Slavic face, and smiling blue eyes, Maya was her name I believe, or perhaps Katya. They raised her as

their daughter in all respects, a fact that also testifies to their kindness. When I think about good Lithuanians—and this is not easy for me to do—I remember this couple, whose names, however, I have forgotten. I hope that Stalin's regime did not do away with them.

Further up the lane, at a distance of only a few hundred meters, was my sister. But Mother's injunction was absolute, that there was to be no contact between us and that neither my sister nor her Lithuanian family should ever know of my presence close by. Aside from the need for caution, what chance she had of being rescued depended on her making a clean break from her former world. (All this was a matter of reason—but what about longing, the trembling heart? What do I know of the emotional world of a girl of six and a half years, of the strength she needed to suppress the secret of her own identity, of the loneliness and sense of abandonment that must have gnawed at her?)

The old lady and her neighbor, for their part, knew about my sister and where she lived. From time to time, they would tell me they had seen her or one of the members of her foster family, and I in turn would tell Mother.

Things went very well for me—my departure from the ghetto without a hitch, my hiding place in a little, out-of-the-way house not far from the river, the old half-childless and easygoing woman, helpful and supportive neighbors—how many of the children who hid during the war were blessed by such lucky circumstances? My friend Dvora was forced to flee from her shelter to the neighboring forest and spend entire days in a pit covered by snow until the danger passed, and Shlomith lived for a year and possibly more in complete isolation in a shed in the back yard, in the space between the chicken and rabbit hutches, with not a living soul to talk to all day long.

Nearly every evening—excluding Sunday—I would receive a letter from Mother and send her one of my own, which was delivered to her the next day. Sometimes I even managed to respond to whatever I had just read in her letter; she, with inexhaustible patience and forbearance, read and absorbed, replied and encouraged. I was not abandoned and forgotten; I knew she was watching over me; her fingertips touched mine; I was not alone.

As a security measure which we took for granted, I would burn her letters in the kitchen stove as soon as I had read them. If only I had kept a few of them, or the entire bundle!

The loneliness and oppression of hiding bred wishes and longings that Mother did her best to grant and that I did nothing to restrain. Books in Lithuanian, a postage stamp album, a Lithuanian-Russian dictionary, and various other things. I now believe that this stream of objects, which the blonde woman faithfully relayed to me, constituted an unnecessary risk, jeopardizing my concealment.

Yet another obsession—early in my period of hiding, the dream took hold of keeping, right here in the old woman's home, a dog, "like all the neighbors"—a pathetic attempt to enjoy—already!—the fruits of my escape, the flight to another planet.

Among the assorted objects I was foolish enough to request that Mother send me was the test tube with the fetus in it. For some reason, Mother complied even with this odd request—which shows the state she was in those days. The old lady's revulsion—she made the sign of the cross several times when she saw the fetus trembling in formaldehyde—was boundless. Even her neighbors, who seemed modern to me, could not conceal their reservations. It is with a certain uneasiness that I recall this episode of childish folly. When I returned after the liberation to the Grinceviciene's, although I found all my other belongings waiting for me, the fetus—which I had hidden deep inside the closet—had mysteriously disappeared. It would appear that even the fate of fetuses from the ghetto was sealed in those days.

I rearranged all my postage stamps and made a detailed catalogue in which I described each and every stamp in my collection, just as in the catalogued sketches of Johann of Innsbruck. The first stamps in the album were from Australia, with the figure of Florence Nightingale leaning over the wounded, next to a kangaroo jumping over fences and obstacles with her joey tucked safely in her pouch; after Australia came Albania with its unique national name, then Belgium, Bolivia, and so on—I can still recall them in order according to the Lithuanian alphabet. Every once in a while I would come back and improve the catalogue or arrange the stamps to better advantage—innocent attempts to bring a little order into my upset world. I read a great

many books then, too, all in Lithuanian. Some of them came from Mother; others I got from our neighbors, perhaps from a public library in town. Thus I came to know about the famous detective Arsine Lupin, who was once thrown along with his girlfriend into a building with closed shutters; when he tried to open a shutter he discovered that all the windows had been sealed with bricks and in the meantime the door outside had slammed shut. The sense of suffocation and panic that engulfed him and his companion stayed with me for many days. Another book from the neighbors had a strong flavor of sex about it, although it was all unclear to me then—*Nikodem Dezma's Career*. It describes the ruthless public career of a vulgar and boorish commoner made possible by his success with the opposite sex. One chapter, which described his visit to a women club, ended with a number of dashes — — — and I remember it in great detail.

For practical reasons I had asked for the thick Russian-Lithuanian dictionary by Sereisky, one of the few books that still remained in our house. I tried memorizing a few phrases in Russian, such as "What's the way to —," "Give me something to eat, please," and "Please hide me in your house."

Although Mother seemed to be careful not to send things that would arouse suspicion, had a search party in fact reached the old lady's house and found the stamps, the books, the newspapers and all the rest, I doubt they would have had any question about the identity of the fugitive in her home.

The first days with the old woman were overwhelming. The change, the differences, were so large and beyond my ability to grasp.

On the one hand, there was the wonder of my successful escape from the ghetto. As if by a miracle I had passed through the eye of a needle, through an impenetrable screen. As in adventure stories by Jules Verne, I was thrown into a new world, where people lived upside down in the bowels of the earth, eating different food, wearing different clothes. Sounds I had not heard for a long time reached me in my new place—the creaking of a well while drawing water, a rooster proclaiming its virility, children laughing; and between each phrase of sound—a tranquil silence, a stillness that was also unfamiliar to me. I had trouble believing that this world was real.

On the other hand, there was a deep anxiety, more immense than that I had felt most days in the ghetto. Had I reached this place before the most recent Aktion, I would probably have been more at peace. As it was, every rustling sound and flickering shadow seen through the curtain made me snap like a wound-up spring. I seemed to have escaped from the ghetto, but in fact I remained trapped in a drawn-out Aktion, chained to a reality in which my existence was no more sanctioned than it was in the small room or cellar during the Kinder Aktion.

There at least Mother had been beside me, and other people of my own kind. Could I trust the old woman not to deliver me deliberately, or not to lapse into gossip? Might she not have shared her secret with her son in prison, who could use me as a bargaining card to gain his freedom? Had this consideration escaped my mother's sharp eyes? And perhaps the Germans would find me by some other means and suddenly appear and take me away? The threat maintained a strong hold on me, and on my dreams, for many years afterward.

Small wonder that I remember little of the first days. I poured my feelings, my fears and my suspicions into my daily letters to Mother. Their importance in keeping my condition tolerable should not be underestimated. Some were beautiful enough for Mother to take to Izzia and Shulamit and read them passages, so they told me once.

Izzia and Shulamit. The fates of our families were at one point woven together. Muki, their youngest son, one year above me in the Hebrew gymnasium, would accompany me home on days when no one came to get me. Now Izzia and Shulamit preserve the memory of Mother as they saw her during the three and a half months when I was no longer by her side—if only I could transfer to myself something of their store of memories.

During my correspondence with Mother I remember particularly the period before the 21st of May, my much anticipated eleventh birthday, an annual event for which Mother always managed to create a festive atmosphere—a present at the foot of the bed in the morning; a Napoleon cake with a special taste for which I continue to search in vain; decorations on the wall; and birthday wishes. Now, in hiding, a month or so before the date, I began writing beside the date in my letters the number of days remaining until my birthday.

From day to day I elaborated the ceremonial style of these announcements, which I wrote in several languages—not only the Yiddish in which my letters were written, but also in Hebrew, Lithuanian, and Russian. I can only guess the pangs I sent through my mother's heart with this innocent countdown.

My memories of being at the Lithuanian woman's rely on small landmarks, such as the daily routine, being bent at the table over a book or stamps with my ear cocked to the window, scanning the street and the green slope; or being absorbed for hours at the window pane and curtain, gazing dejectedly at a fly trying to get outside. After all, in the ghetto, between calamities, I had enjoyed a good deal of freedom to wander and snoop, moving here and there without restriction. But now I was in strict confinement. For ten spring and summer weeks I was shut in a one-room house. Although I cannot remember the details of this oppressive period, I am in no small difficulty writing about it. Ruti, who had a similar hiding place, and claims to remember nothing about it and may even have been taken out of hiding twice, after things got out of hand the first time. In one of her poems, I read:

*A curtain was there and a window was there
Its nerves lit to a scream at a finger's touch*

and I was overwhelmed.

Then there was my close surveillance of Marija Grinceviciene, to whom I was attached twenty-four hours a day. What did she do all day but attend to the minutiae of her life? She cooked and cleaned, darned socks and mended nightgowns. She went out to the yard to draw water from the well—at night, I helped her with this—and every few days, she went downtown either to exchange food stamps or to trade in the black market for things that were hard to find. She was a decent woman who felt obliged, in exchange for the boarding fees she received for keeping me, to find good food. At my request she also brought home a daily newspaper, either in Lithuanian or German. We ate together, and above all I remember slices of bread spread with a layer of butter and a generous sprinkling of salt—a treat I came to enjoy.

On weekends, before going to church, she would have a bath. She put a large tub in the center of the room and emptied into it kettles of hot water from the kitchen stove. She bathed me here, too. Her old white body, her smooth and hairless sex genitals were of no interest to me. I remembered this

because of the great surprise I felt a year later when by chance I first saw the thick dark tufts of hair in the private parts of a young woman. I liked watching the old woman as she finished washing her hair. She would fashion a long gray braid or two, which she then gathered into a bun and hid well under a colorful kerchief that she never went without. She smelled of fresh clean soap and exuded the tranquility of the old, a wholesome calm that had no parallel in the world I came from.

One day I dreamt I helped guard the ghetto fence. The years since then have somewhat obscured my memory of this dream and I cannot tell whether I was stationed high in the watchtower or, more likely, merely stood on the ground below like a guard, inside the fence. It is an important point in my attempts at reconstruction, because at a certain moment I raised my eyes to the sentry, who stood diagonally above me in the tower. The look I exchanged with the German had a certain complicity and secret understanding. A moment later I shifted my gaze forcibly to where it belonged, from the fence to the people in the ghetto, and to my surprise I saw my mother's face. I smiled, proud that she should see me doing my duty, but with a look that said: just between us, even though I seem to be one of the guards, we both know whose side I am really on.

I opened my eyes and there was my mother's face. A week after we had parted she managed to visit me. Mother, I asked in wonder, have you been looking at me long? Did you know I was just dreaming about you? She told me once that such a thing could happen. Since then I have often asked myself, when I look at our sleeping children, whether I too am sometimes woven into their dreams.

Many times have I returned to this strange dream, one of the dreams whose details remain within me for years. Each time I try to digest anew the discomfiting fact that, in my dream, the victim reveals an affinity for his persecutor, is willing to cooperate with him and deliver himself up to him, all in return for a feeling of belonging.

And it is in this embarrassing dream that I find my mother's face so realistically woven. I would willingly risk many more chilling night visions if I could receive in exchange, upon opening my eyes, the living face of my mother.

My last day with Mother began, then, with a dream. She slipped out of the brigade and came to the Lithuanian lady's house at dawn. She stayed with me the entire day. We talked and talked. She sewed on buttons for me and mended my clothes. She had an air of calm, unlike her manner of late. It reminded me of the Sunday three weeks earlier before everything had changed. Mother heard my impressions of the week that had just passed and told me about hers, got to know the old woman, whom she met now for the first time, and laid down a few security measures with her concerning me.

Mother brought chilling news with her, although she must have filtered out much of it. Among other things she told me that the day after my departure, surveillance over the gates had been made much tighter; it was doubtful whether I could have attempted an escape on any other day. As the front line approached, rumors began about a plan for moving the ghetto westward. In addition, there was talk about the possibility of the Riga deportees being brought back to our region, even to our ghetto, with Father among them. Consequently, Mother was hesitant about joining the partisans in the forest, especially since that way out had suffered a crisis recently: a week before my escape, Haim Yellin had been cornered in the city. During the chase, he had wounded and killed some of his pursuers, but in the end he was trapped in a basement, where he was apprehended with his wrists already cut but still alive. He was now no doubt being tortured in some Gestapo dungeon. Some said they had seen him being taken through the ghetto, perhaps for investigation, bound in chains and his face already changed. His friends were confident in him, but they suspected he might be publicly hanged, like Mek. He certainly had no hope of remaining alive. And unfortunately, a group had just been caught in the city as it was escaping to the forest—the truck driver had turned them in. Our people had succeeded in killing him, but the ambushing Germans had fired on and killed most of the escapees. Four of them had managed to return fire and get away. Jews fighting and killing Germans was thrilling but upsetting news—what retaliation might the Jews of the entire ghetto expect?

Towards evening, when darkness fell, Mother got up and left. We parted with the good feeling that we would see one another again soon, at her next visit. In all likelihood, she proceeded from my hiding place fifty steps further to my

sister's house to spend the night with her, before going back to join the brigade at dawn.

It was not strictly speaking a parting, and for many years I expected her to return. There was no doubt in her heart as she put it, that we would meet one another "after the storm." I tended to believe her, even though she had also promised me long ago that war would not break out.

Even if she had had a place to go hide in, or had escaped to the forest, she could not have left us far behind—she owed weekly payments for our hiding places. I do not know how she got so much money, even with her buying and selling. I tried finding out from Izzia and Shulamit whether there was a fund for helping out in such cases in the ghetto; the answer was no. Later, when I left the old woman's house, the burden of payment was reduced, but by that time the path to the forest was closed.

During my first days at Marija Grinceviciene's I feared the Germans would come to get me any moment. Little by little I grew calmer. I saw that the place was out of the way and that no one was watching it. I gradually grew used to the noises around me and to everyday sights. At the same time, any innocent passerby asking for directions would raise waves of disquiet in me, like a stone thrown into a lake leaving ripples.

When I came to the old woman's house the weather was cool and in the evening the stove had to be lit. In May, however, spring came. It was pleasantly warm, and plants turned green and began blossoming. My spirits, too, seemed to lift a little. By chance, Marija needed help retrieving something from her attic, to which there was an opening in the outside wall of her house on the side facing the river, and thus I discovered an unexpected source of diversion. From then on I often climbed the ladder that stood permanently under the opening, taking with me a blanket, a book, and food. I would stay there most of the day. The disadvantage was that I had to climb up in the open, from the outside. I hurried to climb as fast as I could and promised I wouldn't dally in the opening, but would move farther inside.

For the first time, I was able to see the entire area, which I loved doing; it was like going with Mother to hang laundry on the rooftop of our old house, or perch on the wide sill of the window. Now a jumble of roof tops spread around

me, corners of yards, and a strip of street stuck to the middle of the slope. Further down, the roofs appeared to drown in the river, hiding the shore line from my eyes, and, to my disappointment, obscuring the place where the brigade boats docked and the street where the workers marched morning and evening.

But before me I saw the ghetto—the entire territory on the other side of the river laid out as if in the palm of my hand, all the way to the distant hills. I looked down upon it as if I were soaring above it, gazing from a distance with a certain detachment, as spirits might do. The area of the ghetto could be discerned by the grouping of the houses and its main streets. If only I had binoculars; I wanted to go into every house, to squeeze through every door, and especially to split open a large block of buildings that hid my view of the house on Vigriu Street. A flood of warm feelings swept through me, a longing for the people in the valley below. At this hour in the attic, with the sun setting and the last of its rays passing distractedly over the distance, holding in flames one patch of roof or another in the ghetto, a special letter to Mother was born. I tried to describe the sights of this hour—the exhilaration of it, emotionally taking leave of the expanse of life that lay across the river, that formed a part of me. I imagine that this letter was among those Mother showed to Izzia and Shulamit.

In all of this a wild idea came to me. The near bank of the river was hidden from me, as I have said, from my vantage point in the attic, but towards evening I could clearly see boats sailing back to the ghetto during the first third of their voyage—small and fragile, holding indistinct silhouettes of people. One of them was certainly Mother. I wrote her—perhaps she would be willing, one day, during the first part of her crossing, to invent some pretext to move to the middle of the boat and comb her hair, say, so that I might recognize her. Several days passed and I discerned no special movement in the boats. I pestered Mother again, and this time she promised me, but as if against her better judgment, that she would make some gesture. I am ashamed to recall my childish willfulness. One day I noticed a figure standing out somewhat in the blob made by one of the boats. I was seized by the desire to respond by some signal. I climbed down the ladder, and then, flagrantly, back up again, going so far as to deliberately station myself in the

attic opening itself, extending my arm with a kind of covert wave, holding out my arm as I retreated, slowly, into the space under the roof. Thank God this foolish exercise ended safely.

One day I heard through the wall the sound of a plate or glass breaking, then the voice of Maya, who like me was alone at the time, breaking into sobs. Wickedness washed over me—with unrestrained malice I mocked the wretched girl by mimicking her crying, taking pleasure in outdoing her. And even though I was sorry afterward for behaving this way, I never apologized to her. Stupid cruelty of a child! It was indecent of me, as well as imprudent, and it weighed on my conscience a long time.

The days passed without particular incident. My command of the language improved, the "r" sound began rolling much easier off my tongue, and my self-confidence rose. The neighbors complimented me on my excellent Lithuanian and my not necessarily Jewish-looking features. So I conceived my next reckless idea—to leave the house in the dark of evening for a short stroll, first in the yard and then, little by little, outside as well. To my surprise the Lithuanians agreed—my evident restlessness was not lost on them.

At first I stepped out for only a few minutes; then, with Marija's consent, I gradually increased both the amount of time I spent outside the yard and the distance I went beyond it. After weeks of being cooped up in a room, I had a compelling need for some activity, and I was also curious to find out what was happening beyond the shutters of the window and the fence in the yard. My first excursion was very short—at the first moving shadow or sound of a door opening, I whisked myself quickly inside. During the next few days I went further. Cautiously, I went past the neighboring houses, those that seemed to threaten me more directly; in the low light of the evening they seemed sleepy and peaceful. When I saw silhouettes approaching, I would turn artfully in another direction until the person was swallowed by one of the paths; then I would resume my foray.

As if under a spell, I was drawn into the depths of the lane, closer to the paved streets of the city. There was the house where my sister lived. I had no illusions that I would meet her; in any case it was forbidden. But still I wanted, irrationally, to hear her voice—if only by chance—to see her silhouette in a

doorway or window, perhaps to see the face of the Lithuanians who were giving her shelter.

I did in fact get very close to her house once or twice, although the risk was great for both of us. I stationed myself in the shadow of a corner, my gaze fixed on the house prohibited to me. I saw flickering lights; muffled voices reached me from inside, but immediately I had to go, because the closer the lane brought me down to the city, the more often it was frequented, quite naturally, by people. And yet I had stood next to my sister's house; it was real, even though she knew nothing of my presence. I never returned again – and I never saw my little sister again.

My successful excursions from the house drove me to imagine more ambitious designs—to go into the city, no less, to see a film or a children's play. So convinced was I that my plan was possible, that I began scanning the daily newspaper, marking afternoon performances and following reviews. Once I found a notice in the Lithuanian paper for a magician's act that would include giving out prizes, and I saw myself attending it. To the Lithuanian woman's credit, she was naturally wise enough to make no outright attempt to dissuade me from persisting with this futile wish. In the end, the grand plan was always postponed for one reason or another—an unexpected visitor to the house, an air raid that morning, or rumors of wider police searches to be carried out that day.

Because my neighbors listened secretly to the radio, I heard the main news from the Eastern front, about the major victories in the battles of Kursk, Gommel, and later Vitebsk; these reports, together with poring over the daily newspapers—like an invalid confined to his bed who leaves no corner unread—almost gave me the illusion that I was like everyone else. I began taking an interest in various features and articles. With great curiosity I read pretentious descriptions of the impregnable defenses of the *Festung Europa* (the European stronghold) along the English Channel. I followed the declarations that no one would ever get through it. What encouraged me most, however, were the repeated announcements of "redrawing the line" of the Eastern front, the stock euphemism used to describe retreats following military defeats.

In the German army newspaper, my attention was caught by a story written in installments about the adventures of an armored cannon-carrying train running cheek-by-jowl with the Russians on the eastern front, striking against airplane bombers, the increasing partisan activity, and railroad sabotage. The train's courageous soldiers overcame every obstacle, retaliated against their attackers, and pushed relentlessly forward, showering huge artillery shells on the enemy over the horizon. I was a boy and, like a moviegoer, I got caught up in the plot and carried away by their splendid deeds, forgetting which side I was on.

There is yet another odd memory, a strange story in the literary section of the weekend supplement of the German newspaper. It was about a proud and handsome rooster that had been raised in a German family's back yard during the height of the war, staying with them through bombings and war, until one day, to mark the end of the year and the upcoming leave of their son from the front, the family's parents decide, after much deliberation, and for want of other food, to butcher the beautiful rooster. In the evening, the family members gather for the festive meal, but when the main course is served, an oppressive silence falls over the table; their throats become choked with sobs; they are unable to continue eating. This is the gist of a story, awash with self-pity, that stood out in a family German magazine in the summer of 1944.

The days of grace spent in the attic and the evenings spent roaming the neighborhood passed. Perhaps the days turned cold and rainy, or tension had mounted in the area—it was during the first days of June, close to the opening of the second front in the West. In any case, I didn't leave the house again. Even the atmosphere within the house changed, and so did my relations with the old woman. Perhaps we had grown tired of one another, or perhaps she had other reasons for reminding me that shelter in her house was supposed to be temporary and for a limited period only - the chances that her son would be freed from prison had apparently grown, thanks to the approaching front, and he was expected to return to his mother's home. For my part, I may have complained not a little to Mother, asking her to consider changing my housing. This fit in with my mother's scheme to find a rural hiding place for me, if only she could arrange it, far from the big city. The high weekly

sum she was paying for me was also a burden, and she could not afford to keep me there.

So Mother began looking for another place. One day she informed me that she had found a new place in the country. Before long, a woman would visit me and tell me of the arrangements for leaving. Years later I received evidence from the other side corroborating this point. In the words of Ona Peckyte whose name I now know. She wrote me (I translate freely from Lithuanian):

"—much is forgotten over time, and many things are remembered. Yes, I remember your mother. It was in 1944, under German occupation. I worked in the felt boot factory in Janova Street. They brought people from the ghetto to work there. Your mother was among them; I hadn't known her before this, but we would sometimes exchange a few words during work. Not a tall woman, she was thin and looked very tired. I was greatly surprised when she asked me one day if I could hide her son. I didn't sleep all night. I wondered how I could help her, whom to turn to, and whom I could trust..."

I didn't sleep either, the night I received this letter. To be suddenly certain, after all those years, across the distance of seas and continents, that another person existed, a very old woman, who remembered the same details of the plot that I did — that it was not all a fantasy, the fruit of my imagination or a hallucination, as I had sometimes tried to tell myself—I had indeed been there!

And so it was: one evening a short, plump woman with a pleasant face and glasses came to Marija's house. She spoke with me and the old woman, telling us that she would come for me on the following Sunday. I was to be ready at dawn, dressed in good clothes and carrying a small bag. She planned to take me to a certain village, to some good people who could be trusted, and I was not to worry. Before I left, I was to destroy anything I didn't need. Any of my belongings that I really needed, she would bring to me some other time; meanwhile, Marija would hide them.

These were unquiet days, the last days of Germany's presence in the area, three weeks after the invasion of Normandy had begun, and the news was filled with hysterical proclamations. With all this, the tumult of war on the

Eastern front grew ever closer, and sirens wailed more frequently both by night and by day.

A day or two before I left—it must have been about the 24th of June, then—the third anniversary of the German conquest and the beginning of the war was celebrated with a great deal of noise. Newspaper headlines overflowed with the doings of the German military rulers and their Lithuanian supporters, with parades and other commemorative rituals. Their speeches were full of boasting, dripping with poison and hate directed toward the Allies and their Jewish collaborators alike. And even though I had recently been planning in great detail how I would go downtown to watch a children's theatre program, [Peckyte's plans threw me into a panic. We would have to cross the entire city on foot in broad daylight, reach the station, board a truck with strangers, and travel a distance with them—I was stricken with anxiety.

Then I indulged in a shameful act of childishness—I sat down and wrote my mother a whiny letter of complaint. I may have picked up some of the worries and fears of my two Lithuanian guardians. My poor mother. As if she had a choice, as if she would not want the best and safest solution for her son, as if I were not already uniquely lucky in the arrangements she had made for me.

And because my pen flowed so freely, I let loose with pathetic words of parting and sorrow, even going so far as attaching to my letter, with a dramatic gesture that I borrowed perhaps from one of the novels I had read, a lock of hair from my head as a souvenir. To this day I find it hard to reflect on my foolish, ridiculous action; to this very day I can't forgive it to myself.

My brave and tortured mother. She was steadfast in her will to save my life in spite of my burdensome and capricious words. In her next letter—her last—she answered me in a restrained and soothing tone. The arrangements for my escape were safe, she wrote, and there was no need to be anxious about them. What else she wrote, how she said it, what means of persuasion she used, what her final words of parting were exactly, I cannot recall. I was too worried and tense that day to retain for long what she said. More's the pity. I am fortunate that I managed at least to reply to her again, making up with her a few words of conciliation and farewell, somewhat softening my childish protest. These were the last letters we exchanged.

On the last evening, I went to the neighbors to say good-bye. Neither they nor I knew just where I was going next. They fortified me with best wishes and words of encouragement. That night I hardly slept, trying to decipher the indecipherable, to anticipate what might happen to me the next day. In the morning I packed my things put on my best, most grown-up clothes, and said good-bye to my old woman. I thanked her sincerely and with feeling. Now, as I was about to leave, both of us felt the warmth of the bond between us. I promised that when the storm was over I would come back to visit her. We will see each other again, I told her.

In the Village

It was another fine sunny day in the month of June, a Sunday morning just like the one three years before when the war broke out. Peckyte arrived early. With an intense look on her face like the one she had during her first visit, she inspected my clothing and knapsack. I said good-bye to my Lithuanian lady and we left.

We had agreed to keep the largest possible distance between us. At corners, she waited a bit to make certain I was following. She had assured me that at that early hour the city would be empty and that I had nothing to fear. If I were stopped, she had reminded me, I was not to know her, and above all I was not to say where I had come from. Marija had made me swear the same thing, and I made the promise as a thing to be taken for granted.

She set out with me in tow, walking slowly, awkwardly, like a mole blinded by sunlight. I do not recall much of my march across the city. We almost certainly went down the entire length of the little lane, also passing my sister's house. We descended the main artery through which the Russian tanks had rolled four years earlier; at the first opportunity, we turned into a side street that took us to the old quarter. People were sparse, and yet I was dumbfounded at every person we passed. A few glimmers of memory remain: I found out that Peckyte lived in a certain area of the old city; perhaps she conveyed the knowledge to me somehow during our walk, and this remained for years the only clue to her identity that I retained. Later in the walk, I recognized Mapu Street, where we once lived, where stood the "Wall of Death" of our childhood, and before long we were by the back gate to the large courtyard of our house. The garbage cans were still there, but now they were without charm or appeal to me—they were no longer heaped with the treasures they once held, the overflow from the many shops nearby—colorful cardboard boxes, many-hued fabric remnants, ropes and boards. With downcast eyes I passed through the covered passage near our house, the one with the light in the middle that cast shadows. Now I was fearful of my own shadow. Would someone recognize me here? I didn't even think about raising my eyes to the fourth floor. Further on we passed the cathedral, and turned left at the corner where I used to walk

with my friend Danke on our way home from school, and then we were already in Rotushe Square.

We had to wait for a truck next to the former Jewish Ethnographic Institute. A few other people stood there, weekend passengers calmly waiting for a ride. It had been years since I had been so close to strangers, strangers with no conception of the danger they represented to me. Opposite us still stood the model shelter, expanded and reinforced; it had evidently been put to good use in the intervening years. Nearby were the benches and the garden, the spires of churches, the roofs of cathedrals—all stood here as aloof and haughty as before; nothing had changed. Across from them was the stairwell of the bishop's house, redecorated in bold colors. Once, when I was very small, I saw a funeral procession leaving the house in all its pomp and I cried out in wonder, "The dead man forgot to turn off the lights!" My parents laughed, and liked to repeat the story. Now it was I who stood here like a half-dead person, a ghost who belonged to an utterly different world.

Peckyte bought a newspaper and gave it to me, both to pass the time while waiting and, if necessary, hide my face in it. I struggled against the fears that rose and revolved in my mind—how would we get into the vehicle, where would I sit, what would I say if other passengers asked me questions, and especially—what would happen if sinister-looking people joined our journey? If only the truck would come already, so we could leave before the Germans got there. But how would I pass through checkpoints on the way? The truck pulled up; people clambered onto it from all sides, and so did we after the woman paid for both of us and informed the driver of the village where she wanted to stop. We sat some distance apart and, after waiting again for what seemed an age to me, away we went.

The truck turned south. We quickly reached the big bridge over the river; it still bore the damage of the massive attack upon it that Monday night at six on the second day of the war. Soon we were above the southern bank of the river, leaving the city. Beyond this point, on the right, was where the "Flug-Platz" brigade had turned on its daily march to the airport. We continued toward the expanse past the airport, toward the southwest. The road was straight as a ruler, the fields were full of golden grain. There was no sign of war or of armies. From time to time, we met German military trucks with chimneys

perched on them—they were powered by wood-burning engines due to the shortage of gasoline. The truck we were in had low sideboards, and was full of sacks of grain or seeds; we held onto them as we rode. I sat down in the left-hand corner nearest the cab, stealing glances from time to time at the other passengers, hiding my discomfort behind the newspaper so as to shield myself from their searching looks.

People would get on and off at various locations, but thank God there were no inspection points. It was vexing to see how easy it was for non-Jews to get around. We rode for two or three hours, well into the afternoon. I had an apple and a sandwich with me but I hadn't yet tasted either of them. Peckyte and me exchanged glances of mounting relief when she finally motioned to me that our stop was coming up.

The truck turned off the main road toward a village some way off. At Peckyte's request, the truck stopped just after making the turn, and we climbed down. A wagon was waiting there; beside it stood two men. Peckyte greeted them, introduced me, and before I knew what was happening I was already on the wagon and Peckyte had turned back to the main road.

We were alone in the wagon, just the Lithuanian peasant and I. As to Peckyte, the last link between me and the world I had just left behind, she stayed behind, promising that she would visit me one of these days in my new place. Here was the chain of events as I was gradually able to piece them together afterwards: Peckyte had brought me to her native village, where a man named Viktoras Daugelalived. His brother Vincas had agreed to take me in; the brother lived in another village. This much Peckyte had arranged during special preparatory visits that she had made to her own village.

During a long, slow ride that lasted several hours—a single horse pulled the wagon in which Vincas Daugela and I sat side by side—we got acquainted. The horse was weak, but did the job. It was a peasant's caution—I discovered later, on his farm, that he had saved his better horses. Vincas Daugela was broad-shouldered, tall, and somewhat stooped, with a long and very wrinkled face, a pleasant countenance, and merry eyes. Easygoing and good-hearted, he was a heavy smoker and coughed a lot. He was a confirmed bachelor. his farm was in a village on the other side of the town Marijampole, through which

we were journeying. Although he could not read or write, like many in his village, he was keenly aware of world events.

He asked me about my life and shook his head incredulously to hear what was happening to Jews in the city. "Here in our town there used to be a lot of Jews. I knew some of them and they were good, decent people, but all of them were killed during the first days of the war." When he was asked to give shelter to a Jewish child he had assented willingly, especially since it was only a matter of weeks before the Russians would arrive. His manner seemed hesitant; he chose his words carefully—perhaps with the shyness of a peasant meeting a city person, although I felt a certain firmness and decisiveness behind his words.

Heading south, we approached Marijampole -Mariampol, as the Jews called it. The man told me to stretch out in the bottom of the wagon, to pretend indifference, and not to look around too much. If someone stopped us, he said, he would know nothing about me; he had picked me up along the way at my request. I was a mute Russian refugee, looking for work in the area.

We went slowly through the cobblestoned streets. On Sunday morning the village was half asleep, with no special traffic. Not a few of the Jews from our ghetto had lost their lives on their way to the forests after being caught in this very town. We accomplished our journey, though, without incident; there were no roadblocks or guards, and were soon once again on our way along country roads, heading south toward Liepinu, Daugela's village.

Now the Lithuanian explained the cover story he had concocted for me, as he had worked it out in his head during our journey. Although he was a bachelor without a family, there were a number of laborers and a housekeeper on his farm, which was sometimes visited by neighbors and people passing through. Although I did not look Jewish, my accent when speaking Lithuanian might well be a problem. He therefore hit upon the idea of presenting me as a deaf-mute refugee from Latvia—he had heard that they were sending orphans to this region. He suggested that I help him with chores, not only to pay for my keep, but also to blend in with the household and help mask my true identity. I was extremely anxious to please him. I told him I liked to work; that I would try very hard; I had even had some experience raising vegetables. Then he told me that he thought my name should be Juodas—

"black" in Lithuanian. To my wonder, he explained the logic behind this odd notion—he had once met some Latvians and discovered that their language was quite similar to Lithuanian. He had picked up the word "juodas" and knew that this was at least a real Latvian word, without knowing what it meant in their own language. Juodas was also close to Juozas, a common Lithuanian name. Being identified as a Latvian could explain my understanding of the language being spoken around me, and by virtue of being a deaf-mute, I would be absolved of having to answer with a faulty accent. My host was a kind of an overgrown child, a good, kind-hearted man, and a dreamer. It was a good thing that, in the end, my concealment almost never had to withstand any serious tests. It was through his innocence that I was saved.

It was already evening when we came to his home. I was relieved to find that the house was isolated, with no close neighbors. Daugela took his wagon into the back yard and opened the door to me from inside.

An uncontrollable clouding of my senses descended upon me. Even my well-developed sense of direction, which had always stood me in good stead, abandoned me—the orientation of the house in space, my sense of the relative position of the rooms within the house, all turned out next morning to have been wrong.

No sooner had I put my things down when I was ushered to a large, heavy table, where I sat down to eat with all the members of the household. They sat around the table inspecting the strange bird that the master of the house had brought back with him from a visit to his brother; I was even honored with a meal—so I found out afterwards—in the dining room reserved for special occasions. Among the gazes directed at me, the clear and somewhat suspicious look of the serving woman stood out from the first. My city clothes, my foreign ways, the fabulous story of my identity, and my tense behavior were a riddle to them all.

After dinner the peasant hinted for me to join him outside to take a piss, and there, with our backs to the windows of the house, we talked a little in secret. Daugela encouraged me—he was satisfied with the way things were going; judging by the reactions of his household, it appeared that his plan for camouflaging me was working.

I was put to bed in a front room, in a nice bed, padded with pillows and cushions that looked like a stage setting that had stood unused for quite some time. The pajamas I wore, and perhaps my ritual of washing my hands and face before sleeping, only added to their wonder about who I was.

The unfamiliar surroundings and the feeble light of the votive candle lit for the holy Madonna in the corner didn't prevent me from falling into a long though troubled sleep. When I woke up the sun was already high in the sky and all was quiet. At first I couldn't remember where I was. I was ashamed of the contradiction between my promise of readiness to work hard and the impression of laziness that I had certainly just given on this first day. With a generous smile, the farmer came in and welcomed me to a tasty, refreshing breakfast. He offered me some of his clothes, which, although not the right size, were at least more like those worn locally. He also decided to cut my hair—it was long, for it hadn't been cut in months, and I hadn't even thought about it (where might I have cut my hair in the ghetto? I do not recall).

Daugela's reserved suggestions demonstrated to me how much my appearance stood out in the place—and yet my behavior was, relatively speaking, quite calm and deliberate, probably because I had spent such a long time with the elderly woman. Even so, it had not been enough to school me to act like one of them.

What happened first; did we first take a walk through the fields and did he then set me down to cut my hair, or was it the other way around? I find it hard to remember. After years of being cooped up in the ghetto, I was now walking beside a friendly peasant who treated me with respect, showing me with unconcealed pride the extent of his domain. We went through farm buildings that stood beside the house, from there to the vegetable garden, and further out, as in a dream, to an expanse of golden grain. Once again I was walking through country paths like those at the summer resort. A feeling of comfort quickly engulfed me—surely the Germans would not follow me here.

But already on the first day I committed my first slip-up; it is seared in my memory as a blunder.

Evening came and I was once again summoned to the dining room. I found a stranger there who could read and write; that is to say, ostensibly a man of the world. Having heard of the new boy on his neighbor's farm, he had come

to take my measure. Bald and red-faced, he began questioning me and refused to be content with my game of gestures. Daugela did his best to explain to him that I was a deaf-mute and that I couldn't be expected to answer his riddles. It may have been then that he took me to the yard to give me a haircut, hoping his neighbor would leave me in peace. We whispered to one another in the process. When we came back into the room, the neighbor was still there, and I heard the members of the household arguing amongst themselves and with the neighbor, wondering who I was and mentioning that they had seen my lips move while I got my hair cut; moreover, none of my responses or behavior in general was like that of a real deaf-mute. Like a trapped bird, deeply embarrassed, I looked secretly at Daugela, who was hard put to pretend unconcern as if he didn't understand what was going on.

And then the neighbor hit upon the idea of trying to communicate with me by writing. His common sense told him that although differing in speech, Lithuanian and Latvian are sister languages, after all, and there was a chance I might understand what he wrote. I took the bait. In my great distress, I began answering the questions he wrote on a piece of paper, and a written exchange soon developed between us. Time after time I answered, in my foolishness, to the great wonder of all present, and in fluent Lithuanian, too. Here Daugela intervened; with growing concern he had watched the correspondence, and he now motioned for me to go outside.

Too late I realized I had unwittingly revealed the subterfuge. I was trapped. My false identity had crumbled and now I was at the mercy of these people. In my heedlessness I had probably brought disaster on myself and perhaps also on my host and savior. My eyes brimmed with tears; I was panic-stricken. What would become of me now?

Several minutes passed before Daugela came out and called to me in the darkness. He told me that he had been compelled to tell everyone there that I was indeed a Jewish child. It turned out that they had been suspicious of my identity from the beginning because of my clothes and my city behavior, and they hadn't bought the farmer's simple story for a minute. He was aware, he said, that he should never have hatched the idea in the first place. However, he assured me that they had all promised to keep the secret without divulging it to a soul, and he trusted them. Even the snoopy neighbor, who was a man

with education and odd habits, a single man without family, was fundamentally a good man who would do no harm to anyone.

Since the incident passed without bringing disaster, it even resulted in a certain advantage for me. Now that my true identity was known, I was able, to my great relief, to behave more freely with members of the household. To their credit, their loyalty to their master, and perhaps their basic and natural feelings of humanity, were such that they guarded the secret well; none of them gave me away by so much as an innocent slip of the tongue. Even Ona, the housekeeper, who more than any of the others showed her reservations about me, obeyed the wishes of the head of the house. The neighbor, too, kept his lips sealed. We met from time to time and talked a little; he also lent me his books to read. When I left Daugela's house for good, I made a point of saying goodbye to him as well, and during the coming years, when I sent a few letters to my farmer, I always imagined that the first reader of the letters was probably "the learned neighbor".

Now, because of the language incident, even more security precautions were necessary in case something went wrong. Daugela said that Germans came to the farm occasionally, mostly to confiscate crops and livestock and to look for draft dodgers—they used the locals for support troops. And there was always the possibility of a special raid following a suspicion or an informer's tip. It would be best, then, suggested Daugela, if I slept not in the house but in the nearby hayloft, where I would stay whenever I was not needed in the house or yard. The summer nights were warm, and I could wrap up in a blanket and sleep well. An added advantage to the loft over the house was its gate leading out back, through which I could escape straight into the fields without going through the yard. If escape ever became necessary, Daugela suggested that I go some distance and hide in the tall grain. We decided upon a meeting place, in case it was too dangerous to meet in the yard; it was beside another hayshed, further back. On ordinary days I should do some work on the farm, helping with various chores—not that he needed my help, he hastened to add, but so that I would draw less attention from any strangers visiting the place.

But in spite of the Lithuanian's assurances, I never lost the fear, from the first day to the last, that someone who knew the secret of my identity would suddenly turn me in. It was not a concern that was new to me.

Daugela was fundamentally a sensitive man. He gave his instructions apologetically, as if somewhat embarrassed. Yet he behaved courageously; he could not have treated me more humanely than he did. From the time I began sleeping in the loft, he would visit me once or twice in the evenings, even when he had nothing special to say. When I had to stay out there because there were guests in the house, he never forgot to tell Ona to bring me food, or would bring it himself.

So I went to live alone in the hayloft. The bottom part, in front, was a stable; in it were three horses tied to their mangers. These horses were the apple of Daugela's eye, and whenever there was a threat of confiscation, he would send these horses into the grain fields until the danger passed. A ladder extended into the hayloft, which covered most of the stable. I found a remote spot in the pile of hay, next to the corner where the roof met the outer wall of the building, in a place that received light and air. I could reach the place only by crawling through a kind of tunnel through the hay that I made myself. Daugela suggested that I pull the ladder up after me whenever I climbed up, since its presence might arouse suspicion. After a day or two, I got used to the snorting of horses and the sounds they made shuddering and chewing, which went on all day and night, and I began to feel somewhat more at ease.

To this day I have no idea what Daugela's village looked like, or how his farm was situated in relation to it. The village apparently spread over a large area, and I know only that his house was one of the outlying ones, standing in that part of the village closest to the province's principal town, Marijampole. I remember in detail, however, what his farm and its immediate surroundings looked like.

Inside the rectangular yard, the house stood at one end with the gate on its right; opposite it was the hayloft with the gate leading to the fields. On the left, at the other end of the rectangle, were a pigpen, a barn, and a henhouse. Daugela's house, with one and a half stories, was half floored with wooden boards, half with packed clay. The front door led from the kitchen to the barnyard and the fields; it slammed loudly dozens of times throughout the

day. In the center of the yard was a deep well where we washed our hands, and where Ona would heat up the wooden tub for the master's bath. A mean watchdog was tied by a chain to its kennel, and chickens, ducks, pigeons, and turkeys wandered freely about the yard. Outside the yard, furrows of vegetables alternated with sugar beets, and beyond them were the grain fields. Halfway to the fields stood the second hayshed; in it, in addition to hay and straw, there was also a deep pit in which, amazingly, blocks of ice from the previous winter were stored and used all summer long for use in the house.

North of the peasant's farm, beyond the shallow stream on the edge of the town, stood the sugar factory. Its size and its tall smokestack made it the most imposing structure in the area, not only by virtue of its profile on the horizon, but because of the noises it emitted every hour of the day, regulating the surroundings with their rhythm: sirens between shifts, sudden belching of steam, the banging of iron gates as they opened and shut, the whistles of trains coming and going, dragging clanking cars. I was a city boy, and these noises helped reduce my feelings of alienation from the otherwise strange and silent surroundings.

Daugela ran his farm thriftily and with a firm hand. The food he put on the table was simple fare. And even if they occasionally slaughtered a pig, they would explain to me that the meat was going to a special family function somewhere else or was to be sold. When a fire broke out one day in the little shed in the center of the yard, where Ona would often work away behind lock and bolt, I was surprised to discover that it was a smokehouse, chock-full of various kinds of sausage, of a kind I never saw on our table. Putting out the fire not only gave me an opportunity to be truly useful, but also earned me a rare, somewhat softer look from Ona.

In those pre-harvest days of July, it was quiet on Daugela's farm, and I did my best to be useful on the farm and earn my keep. True, due either to my lack of experience or unclear instructions, more than once I did more harm than good, often making people angry. I kept on trying, however. First I was given simple chores, such as feeding scraps to the pigs in their pen or the fowl in the yard, or turning the handle of the churn. Once I had gained more trust, I was allowed to help herd the squealing pigs when they were turned into the

fields while the straw bedding was changed in their pen. Because I lived in the hay shed, it was also my duty to feed and water my neighbors, the horses, a task I was proud to perform. I did my best to help and to make myself liked by all, but I realized I would never effect much of a change in Ona's reserved, perhaps hostile opinion of me. My presence there was clearly not to her liking, and it was only out of deference to the master of the house—Ponas ("lord" in Lithuanian), they all called him, not by his first name—that she suffered my presence. Was it pure xenophobia, or perhaps indirect anger at her master, who had not conferred with her in advance about bringing an unbidden guest? I cannot know. But I did get along well with the other workers on the farm, two seasonal hired hands who lived nearby. They complimented me on my play-acting the first day I was there and were understanding, but they never asked me any questions at all, and we never had a real talk.

During the coming days I slowly came to realize that Ona had a central role in the house, one that went far beyond that of servant and housekeeper. With a wink I was told that she was the lord's mistress, had lived with him out of wedlock for many years, ever since she had arrived, and had had an illegitimate child by him. I was told all this as if it were perfectly natural, but I felt as if I had been told a secret that carried the scent of sin. She was fairly young blonde, and full-bodied, with white energetic arms, and I had difficulty linking her in my mind with the lord, who was so much older than she. On the surface Daugela treated her as if she were one of the servants, and I never heard him address her with affection or saw them touch one another. So Ona was the mistress of the household, and I was doubly careful not to make her angry.

From the harsh world around me I would go, like a scolded cat, to my hiding place in the hayloft. There I had a warm cotton-filled quilt, a bundle of clothes, a few hidden books, even pajamas. I took care—in addition to washing my face and hands—to put my pajamas on every night.

The hay, which filled most of the space in the loft, had a fine, fresh smell, and I grew used to the thistles and prickly clumps of straw in it. Except for Daugela, the members of his household did not know exactly where I slept, only that I was out in the stable.

My hiding place was so complete that even Vincas, who climbed the ladder once or twice to look for me there, was unable to find me except by calling for me several times, and for this he praised me. I was free to do as I wished, not necessarily bound to the house's activities. The opening along the eave of the roof beside which I lay down was important not only for air and light, but also as a lookout point. From here, I could keep track of everything that happened in the yard, with a direct line to the kitchen door. It was not the wide sill of my parents' house nor the attic at the Lithuanian lady's, but watching through the aperture filled a more important function—it gave me a sense of security and command over my situation.

And even today when I lie down on my side, the question sometimes comes to mind whether I am on the "proper" side. To find out, I have to reconstruct the position I slept in up there in the loft, in the space between the rain gutter and the hay; then I know the answer immediately. The origin of this notion lay in one of the few books I found at Daugela's or at his neighbor's—a farmer's almanac, a kind of collection brimming with sundry information and advice for peasants—which I read through from front to back several times. The almanac explained the meaning of the four seasons, the changes in weather throughout the world, the equinox and solstice; it told how to cure a horse's belly ache, or how to help a cow struggling to calve. The book listed agricultural labors by season and had a key to the meaning of dreams. I was drawn to the chapter on keeping well and sleeping healthily. According to the almanac, the best sleep could be attained only in a well-ventilated room under a light covering, and only by sleeping on one's right side. In the loft it was easy to follow the recommendations for plenty of air and a light blanket, but the question of sleeping on the proper side bothered me. I entered my space by crawling in from the right side toward the left, stretching out at the end of the tunnel on my left side, which left me in a position to look outside. Yet here, according to the almanac, I should turn toward the hay with my back to the light, destroying my vantage. I hesitated and then concluded that under the circumstances I had to reject the recommendations. Thanks to these deliberations, however, I still remember today the formula for "healthy sleep on the proper side."

One morning a German soldier suddenly appeared in the yard, riding a bicycle. No one there at the time reacted strongly, and no one brought the fact to my attention. My breathing stopped. In an instant I was on my feet and fleeing in fear to the far side of the farm, not daring to return to the barnyard. It was so unexpected, so out of place in the daily life of the place. Had he been sent to ask about me or take me away? Evening fell and from afar I heard Daugela calling me. As it turned out, no one realized I hadn't been told that Ona's son had been drafted recently, and he now wore a uniform and carried a gun like any other German soldier. When I didn't appear for supper, my host realized that I might have been scared by the sight of Ona's son, and came out to find me. When he brought me back, he insisted on introducing us—I, a Jewish child and refugee from the ghetto, and he, Antanas, a soldier in the German auxiliary forces. He was stationed in a nearby camp and was therefore able to visit; he was one of the family, here. In spite of his proper treatment of me, I found it hard to behave naturally. I was completely unable to get past the barrier of his green-gray uniform and the black weapon in his hand. Thereafter, a lesson having been learned from this incident, I was warned beforehand when they knew he would be over, sometimes with friends, and I would leave for the shed or spend a few hours in the fields.

Days arrived that were quieter than any I had known during the last few years. In appearance and speech I became more and more like the local youths, and while I took care not to reveal myself, I was never again so frightened by the appearance of a stranger in the yard. When one arrived, I would walk in a leisurely manner to a distant corner of the farm or head for the fields at a moderate pace. I was at peace with my improvised life and my prolonged stay in the lap of nature.

What my name was then I cannot remember. I believe I was Juodas to the end, or "Black", as I was first introduced.

Some evenings, after supper, the farmer and I would go out together to urinate in the yard, and it was then that we talked. This was the only daily human contact I had. We would discuss the situation at the front, the chance that the Russians would soon arrive. I sometimes took advantage of these times to criticize Ona, who wasn't nice to me. He would dismiss my claims as unfounded, assuring me that she was a good and loyal person. I was like a

puppy being given shelter and food, with one important nutrient missing from my daily ration. I apparently expected from Ona, the only woman about at the time, something she was unwilling to give - affectionate attention.

It was July, the hottest month of the year. I tried to express the feelings of loneliness that beset me and then intensified, my deepening anxiety, in a daily ritual I found myself performing every evening when circumstances allowed. At that hour, the sky was ablaze with a purple sunset, spotted by silhouettes of clouds. I would station myself behind the hayloft on the side facing the fields to the northeast, in the direction of my city. Full of longing, I would pour out my prayers there in a prescribed order that became more and more fixed with every passing day. These prayers were born first of all in the depths of the cellar, in my hiding place in the armoire, from the fear of footsteps drawing ever nearer, from hours of extreme distress and hopelessness. I would mention my distant loved ones, naming my relatives and friends one by one and including the general population imprisoned in the ghetto, praying in Hebrew and Yiddish for their peace, health, and salvation. I would insert passages from songs of faith, those they had taught us two years ago in the ghetto's temporary school, repeating them three times, seven times, and eighteen times. At the end of this round of improvised prayers I would feel a certain relief.

One morning when I was leaning over a pile of sugarbeets spreading a scorching chemical fertilizer, I looked up and saw Peckyte standing in front of me. I was so surprised that I nearly didn't react. For a moment, I felt a certain discomfort with this invasion of the monk-like barrier I had raised around myself. Perhaps my little sister felt the same way about visits from Mother. Peckyte had indeed come to see me on Mother's behalf, bringing greetings. She had little to tell me about how Mother was doing, or about my sister and the community in the ghetto. She brought me several items of clothing—from Mother or Marija—and went back home. I never saw her again, and at the time I didn't even know her name.

Every once in a while Daugela would discuss with me what I should do when the war front arrived. In contrast to his unprepossessing appearance, he was deliberate and cautious. He reminded me that there were large forests to the southeast. If our region should fill up with Germans, whether as a result of the

war or a search for me, I should consider escaping further away, toward the forests that lay at a distance of a day's walk or two. During the summer, I could hide there for a few days, living off berries, which were plentiful.

I would agree with him, but to myself I wondered if he wanted to be rid of me. Daugela was not only a decent man, however, but one with common sense as well. I could have counted on his knowing that the Russians might appreciate his having saved me, and he had no reason to try to send me away before they came. For that matter German propaganda had unintentionally helped my case by incessantly repeating that the Soviet regime was controlled by Jews. Who knows how many Jews may have owed their survival during the last stages of the war to this misinformation.

How long was I with Daugela? A short while only, five weeks in all—the last week of June and all of July; but life there was so different and my experiences so intense that I find it hard to believe I stayed there such a short while, only half the time I spent at the Lithuanian woman's.

And Peckyte, when exactly did she come to see me? I reached the surprising conclusion that her visit must have occurred only a week or two after my arrival, not later, in spite of my feeling that I had been there a long time. Did she have time, on her return, to meet Mother, to deliver the greetings I had sent with her? The more I think about it, the more uncertain and doubtful it seems: if she came to see me on Sunday, the weekly day of rest—the day she had come to take me from Marija—then it was apparently during the first weekend in July. The memory of Peckyte's visit is linked with the satisfaction I felt at being allowed to spread fertilizer on the sugarbeets—they were finally relying on me enough to give me a more complex task, something they hadn't done during the first few days.

But if that was the timing, it is doubtful that Peckyte managed to meet Mother in the factory, because on Monday in the second week of July, the Germans had begun liquidating the ghetto. Unless Peckyte had, as a special favor, come to visit me on a weekday the week before, about ten days after my arrival. If so, she may have succeeded in giving my love to Mother at the very last moment

In my last letter to Peckyte, before she sank into silence, I tried to ask her about it, but it was already too late.

During these very same days, Father was transferred from Kaiserwald, near Riga, to Ponivezh, in the region of our city. The Germans planned to build one of the largest military airbases in the Baltic area there, and there was talk in the ghetto of the Germans having agreed to return some of the exiles to our city. So Mother had reason to stay in the ghetto and wait. When the war front suddenly drew closer, the Germans sent the Ponivezh prisoners, including my father, straight to the concentration camps in Germany; a short while later, they did the same with the people in our ghetto as well.

Liberation

One Sunday morning, while I was playing in the yard with the old dog by his kennel, happy that we were beginning to be friends and that I could already pet him without his being at the end of his long chain, a motorcycle with a side-car suddenly drove into the yard, and in it were two German soldiers.

I hardly had time to be startled. Continuing to stroke the dog's neck, I managed to half-smile at the invaders. I thought they were looking me over as they parked their motorcycle, but they went into the kitchen, and their behavior gave no indication that they were after me in particular. As soon as the door shut behind them I slowly turned around, ambled lazily to the gate of the barn, went through it to the back door—and shot like lightning out to the fields, farther and farther away. Under the circumstances, my regular hiding place in the hay did not seem safe enough.

In the darkness of the second shed out in the fields, where I could hide behind a crack between the thick unplanned timbers, I stopped for the first time. Cool air from the deep pit where the ice was kept rose into the unhurried peace of the day of rest. It was hard to believe that much of anything could happen on such an ordinary day. A good hour passed and no one came near. I simply could not wait helplessly in a closed place, and went out to the cornfield to look around. Then I heard Daugela shouting from afar: "Juodas where are you?" Cautiously, I approached him from the side, keeping my distance. As usual, he had a light smile on his wrinkled face, as if to assure me and put me at ease, for he understood that I was frightened and he guessed that he would find me at the spot where we had arranged to meet. He had extremely unsettling news: the Germans had come to tell him that because of the approaching front, all inhabitants of the area were being evacuated. They said the evacuation was temporary, no more than a few days, until the situation at the front stabilized. Everyone was to meet in the village with their wagons by two o'clock that day; they would be led out in one of the convoys to a more distant village in the region. People were to take with them only food and bedding. No one was to remain in the area.

Daugela was business-like in spite of the onerous consequences of the order for him—abandoning his livestock, leaving his farm without a caretaker. The

past few days had been relatively quiet. Flashes of light from the front were no more than we were used to, and the muffled rumblings, which brought with them light tremors of the earth, had not grown stronger. The obvious conclusion was that the front was still far off and approaching slowly, and that the evacuation would last quite some time. Embarrassed, he said he could not take me with him—I was likely to arouse suspicion among his neighbors in the caravan, and the longer the evacuation lasted, the greater the danger. So he suggested that I too abandon the place—the region would certainly be crawling with soldiers. I, however, should go in the opposite direction, eastward, to the large forests that he had already discussed with me several times. In the forest I could hide for a few days, and the Russians would arrive there first.

Daugela was candidly apologetic as he spoke, but the idea of going east did not appeal to me. He tried to persuade me that the effort was worth it, and that I was able to do it. My outward appearance was now that of a local youth, and once out of his company I would not provoke unusual questions. He would provide me with some food for the journey and would also leave food for me in one of the mangers in the stable, just in case I had to retrace my steps or arrived back here before he did.

When I recall this conversation, I cannot help being amazed at the man's dedication. A harsh decree had just been imposed upon him, a farmer, yet he came out to the fields to look for the Jewish boy in hiding with him, and to explain to him—patiently—how to find his way to the forest.

It all happened quickly. The farmer went straight back to help Ona pack, lock up, feed and water the livestock, hastily harness a horse to a vastly overloaded wagon, and hide various items of value. There was no point in being a nuisance to them by asking further questions, and within a few minutes there I was, nonplussed and confused, leaving for the first time through the front yard of the house, treading eastward on the main road in broad daylight. What did I take with me? Did I have on sandals, or shoes? Did I climb up to my hiding place once more to take anything? In my pockets or my bundle I had two or three apples, a few slices of bread, and a large slice of sausage, from which I immediately took a few bites. And perhaps I had a few

folded banknotes that Mother had sent with me like iron supplements, which in my innocence I believed could help me at a time like this.

Half incredulously, I took to the road, walking along it with no idea where it was taking me. To my relief, there was no traffic as far as I could see; everyone was apparently busy getting ready to evacuate. This was the same road by which I had arrived several weeks before. As I walked along, I began to realize, with rising discomfort, that the road was leading me closer and closer to town. I hoped that, before reaching the entrance to the city, the road would fork to the east.

Just then, however, an air raid began. One after another, airplanes started diving and strafing the ground. Their principal target was the railroad somewhere ahead of me. A freight train stopped on the tracks and caught fire. Though this happened at a distance of a kilometer or two from me, the sight so frightened me that I jumped into the ditch by the side of the road. It had been more than three years since I had seen such a spectacle from the wide window sill of our old house, and my curiosity had not lessened—while lying on the ground, I tried to identify the airplanes and the logic of their actions, but they were soon gone. The train did not look to me like a military one, more like a freight train bringing sacks of sugar from the factory. What was the point of bombing it? I felt insecure in the exposed place where I lay, and there was a grove of trees not far away. Although it brought me closer to the town and the burning train, the noise of which I could hear from where I stood, I was drawn to it; perhaps it would serve as a temporary substitute for the forest Daugela had told me about.

As I came to the grove, I realized it was much smaller than I thought, and that a frightened family had already taken shelter there. The airplanes, which had disappeared for only a short while, reappeared as if they had forgotten something. This time they hovered suspiciously over our little patch of forest. Once more we crouched in ditches and depressions until the airplanes disappeared.

I realized that this was not a good place for me—because of the people, because the trees drew the attention of the bombers, and because the grove was too close to the railroad. So I got up and moved some distance away, weighing my course of action and waiting for the attack to end. As I looked at

the deserted road, I suddenly saw the figure of a lone German soldier riding a motorcycle, climbing the road to our village. It was a strange sight, and it immediately occurred to me that it must be Antanas, Ona's son. I gathered courage and called his name. At first he didn't hear me, but I ran a short distance after him and we met. As on every other Sunday, he was given a few hours' leave to visit his mother and had set out, unaware of what was going on. I informed him what had happened that morning and prepared him for the likelihood that he would find no one at home when he got there. I received the impression that he would try to catch up with the evacuees and perhaps even join them.

The train cars, which before had looked like the broken beads of a necklace, now turned to a skeletal chain of hollow steel from which thick smoke still rose. It wasn't a good idea to return to the grove and the people in it. I had probably aroused their curiosity by talking to the German soldier—after having earlier pretended to be a deaf-mute. Nor did I have any strong desire to go far from the village. I began to feel hungry and decided to return to the barnyard and take the food Daugela had promised to leave for me. The fact that Ona's son had taken the same direction rather than turn around also strengthened my urge to go back.

It was late in the afternoon by then. When I returned to the yard, an odd silence greeted me. This was how the ghetto had been after it was evacuated. I hurried to the stable—the horses were gone. Deep in the manger I found, as Daugela had promised, a wrapped bundle; in it were another chunk of sausage and half a loaf of bread. After some hesitation, I finished them still in the yard, and then set out again. I feared staying there alone, but also hated to go too far. Now that I knew the stretch of road to the grove of trees and the edge of town, I preferred to take it. In my heart I hoped night would soon fall and prevent me from advancing very far. I was an abandoned pup afraid to leave its kennel.

The angry arrival of a couple of airplanes at a fork in the road sent me quickly into a ditch where a Lithuanian couple and their child were already lying. The airplanes turned toward their unknown destinations on the outskirts of town and disappeared, and the couple argued among themselves about whether to go away or return to their home in spite of the Germans' orders. "Who are

you, *berniukas* (little boy)?" they asked me. Their words, their manner of speech, and the way they took an interest in me led me to believe they were teachers. I answered them with hand gestures, as I thought a deaf-mute would.

The swooping plunges of airplanes along the road broke up our exchange and caused us all to jump once more into the ditch. Immediately afterwards a debate started between the two good people as to how a deaf child could tell as well as they when an airplane was coming—they concluded that the deaf must be blessed with keen instincts.

Because of the heavy activity in the skies, increased by rounds of anti-aircraft guns now becoming audible, the Lithuanians decided to leave the main road and the houses. "Come with us, boy," the woman said. I gladly joined them—the abandoned pup had found a good-hearted passer-by, and began trailing along.

They crossed the main road and turned down a dirt track to the south, passing a brick granary that stood at some distance in the fields. The structure looked sound and capable of serving as a decent shelter. Opening the door revealed a scene reminiscent of kicking a clod of earth from an ants' nest in a field—the place was swarming with people. Entire families were there, the residents of the neighborhood, crowding excitedly around their bundles and telling one another their stormy adventures—a scene very familiar to me. I do not know whether they were hiding here because of the air raid or whether they were trying to evade the evacuation order that hung over them. Every so often the large doors opened again, and more people would crowd inside, like livestock seeking shelter in a blizzard.

The day was ending and the crowd readied itself, with much tumult, for a night's sleep. But then the doors opened once more, and there stood a number of German soldiers, and a heavy machine gun in their hands. They spoke to those who were near

the doors, briefly and sharply, without raising their voices, ordering everyone to clear out of the granary immediately—it was meant, as it happens, to house a unit of German soldiers. The announcement spread like a confused stammer through the crowd, accompanied by muttering and protest. In spite of the unusual circumstances, I felt a certain comfort and security in my

anonymity within the grumbling crowd, which began moving slowly and with evident reluctance. Clearly they had never been in a ghetto.

The people emerged from the granary, and most of them miraculously disappeared. It was not clear to me what I would do now. And then, while I was trailing slowly behind the others, at a certain moment that was both sharply defined but not at all understood, I followed an inexplicable impulse to turn my head and look back.

In that same split second in the evening dusk, my eyes beheld an unearthly sight: away to the north, the entire sugar factory began, in one massive block, to rise slowly into the air; then during its slow disintegration, as in a slow-motion film, it began breaking into small bits, and the fragments started to float, in equally moderate tempo, down to the ground, piece by piece.

No sound had yet reached us and no flames could be seen. Perhaps a shock wave had reached me, for otherwise why had I suddenly turned around for no clear reason? Perhaps the teacher-couple was right about human instincts.

The sight was so shocking, so spectacular and frightening, that I started an uncontrollable, headlong, and aimless flight to the southwest, casting glances over my shoulder as I ran. All this happened before a loud, rolling rumble reached me, shaking the ground like an earthquake. The noise had not yet subsided when a column of fire began to shoot up behind me. Giant flames burst into the sky from the factory, lighting up the area as if it were broad daylight; they shot up higher and higher through the polished ribs of the steel structure and filled the space with purple tongues that turned instantly into black smoke, shooting out on all sides and engulfing everything around them.

The silhouette of the factory, the mighty and solid foundation of the entire region, crumbled into pieces before my eyes. White plumes of steam, pulsing and whistling like a hundred engines, began hissing in the covering darkness; evidently they were caused by steam boilers splitting apart. A splutter of small explosions followed, as if the place were stocked with caches of arms, now being set ablaze one after another. There had indeed been rumors for weeks that the Germans were stocking the factory with dynamite, truckload after truckload, to blow it up in case of retreat.

I continued running like a frightened hare, without knowing where or why. Then, as if timed to coincide with the explosion of the factory, I suddenly

heard gunshots. At first I thought they belonged to the machine gunners in the granary trying out their weapons, but I soon realized the shots were coming from a different direction. Rockets rose red in the sky, light artillery shells exploded not far away, and streams of tracer bullets flared with splendid slowness, chasing one another as if trying to impose rhythm and order on the surrounding chaos.

The entire area lit up. Suddenly, inexplicably, bursts of fire issued from behind every mound and stack of straw, and though the shots were not necessarily directed anywhere in particular, the reddish cascades of tracer shells began illuminating for me my path of escape. Viper-like hisses swept closer and closer to my head, leaving little doubt that they were bullets.

I ran and ran, and fell. Now I saw no one around me—I was alone. Far to the north, the burning frame of the factory continued to light the horizon like a sunset, like the red copy of a sketch whose original had disappeared.

I ran and ran; I ran to save my soul. I understood that the front had suddenly closed in on me, and that I was scuttling through the space between the two sides as they faced off with fiery displays of strength.

Through the changeable, flickering dusk I saw a number of houses, and I fled automatically in their direction. As I drew nearer, I saw a dark stain in the ground—a pit or dugout. I threw myself into this with such force that I could not control my descent, even after noticing that the place was full of people. One or two other refugees from the granary may have tumbled in after me.

The dugout was narrow, and people lay crowded in it in weary silence. Those near the opening moved a bit to make room for me, and there I stayed on my knees, curled up and cold, until the next morning. Sleep was next to impossible. The noise of explosions grew louder, and people prayed that we would not be hit. It bothered me very much to be so near the opening. During intermissions of gunshot rounds and shell explosions, there were broken snatches of conversation—it was evident that else knew one another, and that I was the only stranger. I continued to play deaf and dumb—who knew what tomorrow would bring and who the soldiers around us were.

For the last part of the night, it was as if the sounds of war had grown tired and calmed down. A silence fell all around. My neighbors, who had been talking in whispers, also stopped. Once more I was in a shelter, once more

crowded into a mass of waiting people, who strained to decipher the secrets in the silence.

Little by little voices emerged from the silence. At first far away, then approaching nearer and nearer. They walked around, uttering unclear calls and shouts. They were evidently engaged in some activity. Were they more local people searching for shelter, or soldiers looking for something, stationed above us for some unknown purpose.

Footsteps were approaching. Against the pale sky a man's silhouette could be seen. He came straight for the dugout; and we held our breath.

Carefully, he groped his way inside; perhaps he had even started to lower his pants when he cursed angrily and went away.

The curse was in Russian.

I was saved.

A flood of words escaped from my mouth. I had to announce my existence, to explain in a few words to the farmers near me who I really was; how I, a Jewish child from a distant city, had come to this far-off place. In their eyes I was like an odd creature who had landed from the moon—all the Jews in the area, from the nearby town, had been killed off three years before.

No, it was impossible to say it all, nor could I express it. In the meantime, we still did not dare leave the dugout. Only later, in full daylight, when quiet continued to reign, did we emerge and stretch our limbs. Mortars were standing all around us, their crews earnestly engaged in cleaning and oiling. They gave us tight-lipped smiles: it was the 81-millimeter mortar unit of the Red Army that liberated me—not in a glorious parade or with festive singing, but with a ripe Russian curse.

It took several days, perhaps even weeks, before I fully understood what had happened in such an offhand way during the twilight hours of the morning. With what casual simplicity the miracle took place. Everything during the last day had occurred with inexplicable suddenness. Only the morning before, I had been petting a dog in its kennel; then the sidecar motorcycle had arrived, and overnight the area had changed hands. And it had happened at night, which added a mysterious dimension. The darkness that lifted was like a slowly rising curtain in an opera, revealing rescuing angels in the light of day.

Dumbfounded by the tempo of events during the past day, I wandered as if drunk among the soldiers. I felt the need to present myself to them, to tell and tell—my rebirth demanded an endless stream of talk. Some soldiers nodded understandingly; some added that they had "Hebrew" friends, as they say in Russian. One officer perhaps even patted me on the back and tried to speak to me in lame Yiddish. I cannot remember all that happened that day. The soldiers were busy fortifying their position and getting ready to move on, and we civilians were ordered to move south before the battle was renewed.

One of the families that had been kind to me in the dugout invited me to join them. They harnessed a horse to a wagon, fed their animals, gathered a few possessions, and traveled to their relatives in another village that was farther away from the currently drawn line of battle. There was no point, they said, in any other course of action—Daugela's house might very well still be on the other side of the front, and it was better not to try to return, especially since he himself had left. So I went with these people.

The trip to the relatives took no more than an hour or two, but for me it was a journey as magical as the entire day. Our path wound through remote country roads; we avoided the main roads, which were full of military vehicles. It was as if I were thrown behind the scenes of a gigantic play: everywhere we went, army troops were in movement or getting organized—a sleepy rural area had been transformed overnight into a stormy arena of activity. Tents were pitched, telephone lines were stretched, short signposts were erected at every crossroads. From groves of trees buildings displayed the symbol of the Red Cross, which I remembered from the first day of the war. The soldiers were friendly and happy, their actions sure; their behavior was free, careless even; cigarettes made of *mahorka*, leaves of tobacco dried and cut by hand and rolled in a strip of newspaper, hung constantly between their lips; crumpled sailor caps sat low on their foreheads. With their noisy, never-ending bustle, accompanied by vehement curses and friendly interjections on the order of "*a-nu rebiata*"—come on, guys—they were like a traveling troupe of tinsmiths. Whenever they stopped us for inspection, they exchanged lively greetings with us and good-naturedly let us go on. I wanted to run from one to the other as I once ran after them begging for *znatchok* as a souvenir, embracing them and kissing them, letting each and every one of them know how grateful I was

for being saved from certain death. But they were busy, their minds on other things.

We got to the relatives' home- a huge and hospitable house, with several wings, into which many refugees of the last few days were already packed. They put food out on a table in the yard, and at night spread blankets on the ground for us. It looked as if we might have to wait for an unknown period of time until the front moved on and everyone could go back home.

Rumors that the Germans would counterattack to regain territory never stopped circulating, and I was very afraid.

Strange days ensued. Signs of war were everywhere. We were close to the front, but its lines were unclear. Cannons echoed, airplanes dropped bombs, but we could not discern who was attacking and who was being attacked. During air raids we often dispersed into the fields to distance ourselves from the house and the Russian troops stationed nearby. I no longer had any faith in doorjambs, as in the past. When airplanes would swoop down low, scattering shots on all sides, I preferred to hide alone inside a haystack, curled up with my eyes closed and my breath drawn, as many times before. Did I remember Father's stories about the child who fell asleep in the stack and in the end found himself baked in a loaf of bread? The planes flew over without doing harm; no bombs fell close to us.

Every day, the Lithuanians returned to their farm, which lay inside the front; I went with them. From one visit to another I came to know the route. The Russians stationed in the Lithuanians' house greeted us warmly but allowed us to stay only for a short period. Within a few days, however, they permitted the father of the family to stay overnight so he could take care of the animals. After advancing that Monday night, the front appeared to have stopped again, who knew for how long.

The walk to the farm was always packed with adventure. The front was close and the danger of being shelled or bombed was ever-present. We tried to avoid large buildings or encampments of soldiers. Most of the airplanes flying overhead in daylight hours were Russian, on their way to the front. They would pass over us in a low, characteristic formation—in the center, in arrowhead formation, a group of four heavy, slow, double-engine fighter-bombers; beside them a pair of two of light and nimble fighter planes

perpetually making seemingly theatrical swoops to the sides, up and down, apparently ensuring the route. On return from their mission—after a short time—the bombers flew higher and more swiftly, their load visibly lightened. The fighter planes continued to buzz around them like playful pups. One day a pair of such planes loomed overhead while we were walking in the fields. Even though we were safe because they were “ours”, we instinctively jumped into the ditch beside the road, and I cut my foot on a rusty barbed-wire fence. Although it bled and even hurt, I kept going and didn't pay much attention to the wound. But on my return to our lodgings, I believe they dressed the wound—I may even have been attended by a military medic. However that may be, about two weeks later the wound, which apparently had not been properly cleaned, gave me a fever and caused me quite a bit of trouble. Today I still have tiny scars on the top of my left foot, and they mean a lot to me, providing me with the physical evidence I myself sometimes need that my story is true.

The Russians had *katyushas*—female soldiers who bore arms, wore uniforms and insignia, and served in various units in the field. They were equals among equals, and were treated without special marks of courtesy. My eyes were also drawn to boy soldiers serving in different units. They were foundlings, aged twelve to sixteen, who were swept up by the military campaigns, bore arms and wore uniforms, sometimes with medals, spat, smoked and cursed, tried to speak in a deep bass voice like adults, and filled various soldierly functions. I wanted with all my heart to be just like them and to join the Red Army.

Every day the country folk returned home, and every day the Russians assured them that they would be gone in a day or two. A trusting and cordial relationship grew between them. The Lithuanians were impressed by the care the Russians took with their house. None of them seemed to get drunk or chase the village girls, nor did they make free with other people's property. Some of the soldiers, themselves from the country, even took on part of the more urgent tasks on the farm. But with all of this there was a mystery: the soldiers from the unit occupying the peasants' house, while allowing them to work for several hours in the yard, strictly forbade them from entering the house. The Lithuanians wondered—what kind of secret weapon were the

Russians hiding there? One day a boy in the family managed to take advantage of a lapse in their temporary guests' vigilance, stole into the rooms inside, and solved the riddle. As it happened, the soldiers had slaughtered a pig from the neighboring farm and were keeping the meat in the kitchen. The Lithuanians were amazed to hear that the Russians were apparently ashamed of having stolen from the neighbors—quite unlike what the Germans would have done, they added.

A few more days passed and one morning the troops disappeared, as if they had never been there. The Lithuanians were free to return home, taking me with them—the front had moved elsewhere. On our return trip, I heard that all the neighboring villages were already under Russian control, and that their evacuated residents had returned to their homes. Full of gratitude, I parted from my good-hearted hosts and excitedly set out for Daugela's house.

This time I approached Daugela's house through the front gate. At the time, Daugela was closer to me than any other person, my tenuous tie to my true identity and to the world where I had once belonged. I came to him, a new self. The gate opened, chickens were in the yard, the pigs' familiar grunts rose from the pigsty—I had been away only about a week, and nothing had changed. Where was Daugela? Ona met me in the kitchen with an agreeable look, but did not seem overjoyed. The master might be in the hayloft, she muttered.

I went out to the stable, my good old shelter. Daugela wasn't with the horses or anywhere I looked. I shouted once, twice, three times, until finally a muffled answer came from the mounds of hay—my master and rescuer was in my hiding place under the haystack, fast asleep...

I put up the ladder and he descended, somewhat sheepishly. We hugged each other and shook hands. The Russians, it appeared, had begun enlisting workers to build an airport, and my host was trying to evade the draft in my former hiding place.

We briefly exchanged news of the last few days since we had seen one another. My heart was full and overflowing, ready to tell the whole story of my exodus, but circumstances didn't allow it.

He, for his part, said that after gathering the country people together, the Germans had led them by caravan to a neighboring village. There they were

kept under heavy guard for a few days until they were allowed to return home, where they found themselves under Russian rule. The Russians tried to confiscate Daugela's horses, but he had succeeded in hiding them in the fields. Now they were after the man himself. While explaining this to me, he asked me for a letter testifying that he had saved me. With the help of such a document, he felt certain they would leave him alone and even help him out in the future. I solemnly wrote him a note in the most official language I could command, both in Lithuanian and Yiddish, stating that Vincas Daugela of the village of Liepinu in Marijampole county had hidden me in his home from such a date to such a date, risking his life to save me from the Germans, and that I would remember him always for it. I also requested that he be helped in any way possible. I signed the note with my full name, giving our old address in the city.

We descended from the loft and ate a good meal in his house. The man insisted that tonight I would not sleep in my customary place, as I had planned to do, but rather in his house. He also suggested repeatedly that I stay with him until the situation on the front was clear. The front might pull back—the Germans were strong and had not yet been defeated. I thanked him again and again, but said I wanted most of all to try to get back as soon as possible to my city. He promised to inquire of friends about the location of the front in that region and about possible means of transportation.

We went out for a walk in the field, where he told me a little about what had happened there. Not only had the sugar factory been bombed and burned—its caved-in skeleton was visible from all around—but, over the past few nights, the Germans had been bombing the area heavily. He led me out behind the second hayshed, which stood in the middle of his fields, and showed me, to my amazement, a huge crater whose sides consisted of crumbled clods mixed with scraps of metal, only a meter or two from the outer wall of the shed. Daugela guessed that a 350- or 500-kilogram bomb had fallen during one of the raids; the Germans had evidently been aiming for the railroad tracks or the remains of the factory. I wondered if they weren't also still after me.

Later that evening, or perhaps the next morning, Daugela informed me that my city Kovno was also in Russian hands, and that the way was open. We

could get in touch with the military command in the city and find out how to get there. The Lithuanian entreated me again to stay, and I am unable to say whether his offer to remain with him stemmed from politeness only or a sincere and honest wish. But I had already decided to leave the next day. Had I heard then that most of my city had been burned? But I had no patience at the time, and didn't want to stay even an hour longer.

Morning came. I went out to the loft and, groping stubbornly, extracted the few belongings I had accumulated during my stay that were scattered among layers of hay. This time I took leave of Ona as an equal. Once more I left with the farmer, as in the beginning, by wagon, but this time I sat up straight at his side with a secret joy in my heart, and we were going in the opposite direction—toward the city. And even though he feared that they would confiscate his horse, Daugela insisted that he himself bring me to the local military command.

In the city, they directed us to the military headquarters. The commander greeted me very cordially, with a broad smile. He listened to my halting Russian and clapped Daugela on the shoulder. I can imagine that Daugela expected a more ceremonious acknowledgement. The officer gave me a note for the military policeman who was directing traffic at the northern exit from town, and Daugela took me there. We shook hands and said good-bye. It was clear to both of us that our parting was temporary and that we would meet again. I thanked him again and again, using all the words of gratitude in my vocabulary. A military truck arrived. I was hoisted up, and the truck pulled out, heading north.

Return

Once more I was on the road, only six weeks since my previous journey over the same path. Two or three Lithuanians were with me; they too were returning to their homes. The roads were loaded with military vehicles traveling in every direction. Occasionally we cast worried glances at airplanes passing in the sky—I had trouble getting rid of certain anxieties. What if they suddenly came back, bursting in upon us and cutting off this narrow road stretching like a slender thread between yesterday and tomorrow, turning the wheel back? This latent fear was to hover over me for many years to come.

After an hour or two of travel, we were already close to the city, and the truck stopped for a rest in a townlet village along the main road. As usual, I took a short stroll. I soon found myself looking at the single remaining wall of a building with a splendid Hebrew inscription on its side—the burned facade of a synagogue. A pile of bricks and iron behind the wall was already beginning to blend in with the surrounding rubble, wordlessly telling me of the dreadful fate of the Jewish community there.

This was during my first stop on the way back. For years I didn't fully understand why I was so impressed by the image of this ruined synagogue in the village of Gudleva. Perhaps because, except for the sugar factory, it was the first glimpse I had of war's destruction on my return trip, and of the destruction of the Jewish world everywhere. In this synagogue, too, like the one in grandfather's village, they had imprisoned the Jews of the surrounding towns before killing them. From here on, through my future years of wandering, the reality of half-bombed buildings never ceased to accompany me like a permanent backdrop, depressing my spirits.

We got back in the vehicle and before long found ourselves approaching the city's suburbs. Here the driver turned left, and we had to get off. Only a few kilometers lay between us and the city itself, and I started to cross them on foot.

I was following the daily path of the airport brigade. It was a hot day at the beginning of August. My backpack was getting heavy, and I grew thirsty. Slowly we made our way to the slope that descended toward the confluence of the rivers. From here we could see the entire city; from this distance it looked quite undamaged, even though a few of the river's bridges lay askew like unwanted children's toys.

The other passengers went off to their destinations, and I was soon alone. The road I was on dipped down toward the riverbank and turned into the main thoroughfare of one of the suburbs. I noticed a rifle-bearing soldier walking with two people, a young man and woman. Their hair was thin, and they were dressed in a patchwork of ill-fitting clothes. I must have heard snatches of their speech as I approached, and there may have been something in their looks that prompted me to ask out loud—"Yidn?" ("Jews?")

And they answer, amazed, “*Yo, geviss Yidn. Un ver bistu, yingele?*” [“Yes, certainly Jews. And who are you, boy ?”]

Our steps slowed. I struggled to say in a few words who I was, where I had been, and where I was bound. At first hesitant, stuttering like a man who has long sat without speaking in solitary confinement, thickly saying a few words, choosing a few sentences to utter for the first time out loud in the light of day, I found myself talking to the first two Jews I had met in many months, in my own language, my native tongue, Yiddish. My surprise was so great, my excitement so strong, that I burst out crying, shedding a river of tears as deep and wide as the rivers below me, tears that had been dammed up and held within me for months—for years.

And this young couple, who had just now emerged from the forest, together with the soldier who had stopped them and was taking them to the police station, all looked abashed at the big boy crying in the middle of the street.

Intermediate Epilogue: Later

I never saw my Daugela again.

I wrote him a letter some time later (weeks? months?), then a second and a third. I opened them with “*Brangus Mano Pagelbetoyas*”—“My Dear Rescuer.” After she came to Israel, my friend Clara told me that Daugela came once to our city looking for me, and met her. But I was already an ocean away.

Thirty-four years later, while writing these pages, I suddenly woke up, as from a deep sleep, and realized that during all these years I had never tried to contact the people who saved me.

Once awoken, I began a search for my Lithuanians. I remembered names and places only dimly. I wrote to the secretaries of the workers’ councils and the editors of newspapers in Lithuania, but received no response. Friends referred me to a person of central importance, the Vice President of the Lithuanian Soviet, who is known for his affection for Jews, the poet Miežolaitis. It is he who found Peckyte for me—and he who told me her name. I also heard from the village of Liepinu—I received a letter from Ona.

From her letter fell a photograph of an elderly couple standing in front of a house. In her letter—written for her by a young girl—Ona told me that the

master had passed away four years earlier. "He always remembered you and thought that perhaps you were drowned in the flood," she wrote.

Later, I learned that a huge flood had indeed inundated our city during those years, a flood of the kind I had been afraid of as a child, and many children from a certain orphanage had lost their lives in it.

"I am sending you a picture of us by the pear tree, which you probably remember. I myself am now old and alone, with many pains in my legs. I can hardly walk. Some good people here bring me food."

I was so excited, so happy to hear from her. I wrote her back once more, and then again; I sent her packages of food. In my next letter I planned to ask her, among other things, what had happened to her son. Did she see him after the war? She had said she was bereft. If he died during the war, I may have been the last one to see him that Sunday, the evening of the German retreat from the area.

I received one other letter from there, from Peckyte; it is perhaps the most precious of all. She was able to fill in several pieces in the puzzle of my story. She wrote:

"...the next day [at my mother's request], I went to see some people in Marijampole that I knew, but they refused. Then I turned to Vincas Daugela, whom I had known for a long time, and he consented. He agreed to come to the village of Dzencalaukus, where his brother and my sisters live.

Several days later I went to the address your mother gave me. Here they had brought a little 11-year-old boy with black hair. It was you. We walked to Rotushe Square and got on a truck; there were no buses then. I don't know who took you out of the ghetto. It was not a peaceful time and people didn't talk much. All through the trip you held a newspaper (as if you were reading it) and we didn't talk. Vincas Daugela was already waiting for us in Dzencalaukus.

Several weeks passed. Your mother was very worried about you, so I went to see you in Liepinu. They brought you out of the stable, because they were afraid to keep you in the house. The Soviet army arrived a few weeks later. The next time I saw Daugela's family, you were gone."

She also wrote:

*"... I don't think what I did was heroic. I'm a woman of faith,
and I was happy to be of some help to a human being in distress..."*

I stayed in the city for a year and a half and never once tried to find her, to identify her. Now I wrote to her, thanking her; during the next few years I sent her packages of food, as well as rosary beads made of olive wood from Bethlehem, which pleased her, devout Catholic that she was. Faithfully, in so far as I could, I stayed with her to the last.

Would I ever want to go back? Once, in the past, my response would have been an unequivocal "no". But lately the Iron Curtain has come down, and for only four hundred ten dollars you can buy an airplane ticket!

And yet it is hard: not only because of the suspicion—actually, raw fear—of confronting the concrete reality at the base of my memories, but also because of my revulsion at the idea of walking the streets where murderers from the past are on the loose. Some were never arrested; others, whom the Soviet regime had imprisoned, are now considered war heroes in independent Lithuania.

Maria Grinceviciene and Peckyte on the one hand—and Martha's family on the other. How am I to look upon this people?

Danke, a courageous fellow, went there. He arrived by ferry from Scandinavia, so that he wouldn't be tied to the date of a return ticket by air. He went into the Rotushe building—the city hall—and asked for and received his birth certificate. "I went through Daukanto, Dauksiu (streets near our houses); I went down to the river and saw the *Parakhod* (the riverboat)... that was the space we lived in... listen, it's part of my childhood, there's no help for it. I suddenly felt as if I belonged to a certain place, and it has nothing to do with what happened to my beloved ones." That's Danke. And my friend Ruti hints that she would be glad to go there with me. But I am hesitant about a journey with the two of us, for fear our shared emotion might be a stumbling block, so I postpone the decision to another time.

I will certainly not go there alone. I am not certain that even Miriam's company is enough for me. It would be best if my children came with me as

well. And from South America I would invite Shaul, son of my childhood friend Judith; he is doing well as a newspaper photographer.

And if I go there, what route shall I take? I will begin in the old city near Rotushe Square; I will glance up at the fourth story of our old flat—is it still roofed with tin? I will look into the dark gate to see if shadows still flee their pursuers. From there I will go up to Green Hill, crossing the Big and Little Workers' Streets to the top of the butte, and I will look out over the area of the former ghetto, beyond the river. Before crossing it, perhaps I will look for the felt factory, which I never went to see. I will also ask there about Marija's son, the one who was in prison and whom I never met. And then I will cross the river and turn left toward the sand dunes where the ghetto's Jewish cemetery was, where I will look for a plate with, Mek's name on it; I will go back and turn right into Varniu Street, where the big apartment complexes once stood, Democrats Square, and from there to the left where Vigriu 44 must have been. Further to the west, the old Jewish town of Slobodka, and from there—to the Ninth Fort; there I will walk the path on foot, the path taken by tens of thousands.

... And from the city I will go south to the village of Liepinu and its neighboring town. Was the sugar factory rebuilt? I will look for Daugela's house and fields, and try to reconstruct my movements during the night of battles and after; perhaps I will search out the good people who took me in during the first days after liberation.

Perhaps then I will go north to my rabbi grandfather's village, and to the grove beside the train station, where the tracks cross the main road; there I can pay respect also to my wife Miriam's grandmother and grandfather, who are buried there with my grandparents. And further on, in the northernmost part of the country, to my mother's village, where I have never been, to the mass grave where her brother and sister and their families, and my grandmother, lie, to the tombstone of my grandfather Shalom-Zvi, of which I have a photograph. And if I have time, perhaps I will go west, to the Curonian Spit on the shore of the Baltic Sea, to see if Thomas Mann's summer resort is really there, as my mother wrote in a letter to her sister. It was there that my parents spent a belated honeymoon, after which I was born.

Then I will return home.

A New Year

The First Days

In the blink of an eye, at dawn, the Germans were gone. In an instant the death sentence that had been hanging constantly over my head was repealed and was no more. And right away, as a direct result of my great excitement, I felt the need for action, for movement. Staying in one place had been part of the hiding, a kind of mechanism to avoid what was following me. . Now I had to move, to leave, to go on, ever onward. To go anywhere I wanted, to explore urgently the dream made real.

It was like emerging from a hole after an earthquake, like leaving the ark after the flood. Who was left? What had happened to the rest? The whole point of liberation was to discover that your loved ones had been spared. How else did I imagine what liberation would be like when it came, if not that every member of our family should meet together, and that we should return to our old home? Failing that, the miracle would be flawed. We must meet, sit down together, and talk and talk and talk. It was a necessary part of the anticipated meeting at the end of it all that we exchange accounts of our experiences. Listen to my story, hear what happened to me.

This last pleasure of liberation was in many respects denied me. Perhaps this is why these pages were born now, so many years later.

One hundred and fifty days had passed between my departure from Mother and the day of liberation. One hundred and fifty days of hiding, leading to my rebirth. Until that day of liberation arrived, I couldn't allow myself to dwell too much on what would happen afterwards. But after liberation—why shouldn't she come, why shouldn't I meet her immediately?

Mother never appeared, and something lay shriveled inside me for many years, refusing to give up waiting for her to come and reclaim me.

Shortly after I met the young Jewish couple, I found myself in an office, sitting across from a man who first listened intently to my story, then immediately rattled off to me—and although I was only a child of eleven years and two months, I could sense his smug, businesslike self-satisfaction—the deeds and

achievements of the newly founded Jewish committee that was helping refugees return to the city: a soup kitchen serving free food, a clothes warehouse for basic gear, a list of abandoned apartments for a place to stay. Before long they intended to open a dormitory, and perhaps even a school, if they found enough surviving children. Volunteers were at hand throughout the city and region, and such children were already being discovered. He recited these accomplishments with sparkling eyes, and I—what I wanted was only something to eat and a place to sleep and sleep some more.

I went to the soup kitchen that, like the office, was also on the main boulevard of the city. Its second story had been a German officers' club. I met other survivors there. In one of the many rooms I found a stack of old Lithuanian magazines that were mostly about airplanes. Here there had been a club for Lithuanian airplane aficionados.

When night fell I went to sleep in a flat that had belonged to the families of German officers, together with other people to whom I had been assigned. The former dwellers had obviously abandoned the flat in haste, leaving much behind.

The next morning I went straight to old Maria hoping for some kind of continuity to bind together the drastic changes I had undergone. I found her seated at home, embroidering, happy to see me. She told me of the hard times the city had gone through, days of bombings and battles. Now, thank God, it was all over. She had been an eyewitness to the ghetto's destruction, and told me how it had been wrapped for days in flames, emitting occasional loud explosions. It was said that not a single house was whole any more, and not a single Jew remained. Peckyte had visited her a few days before it happened and had taken some clothes for me. Maria had hidden the rest of my possessions—my books and stamps, just as I had left them. She suggested that I stay with her until my situation cleared up. I didn't feel I had the strength to go back and stay there. She said nothing about her son. She knew nothing about my sister, not having seen the family for several weeks. Perhaps the blonde woman would know more about her, and about my mother as well, but they had moved to a new flat in the center of the town after the liberation. I got their address and went there immediately.

I found them in a nice flat on the slope of Green Hill, which faces the city center. They had evidently received their place from the authorities, perhaps because they had adopted a Russian girl. They met me with great kindness, happy at my return, and asked me questions about my adventures. They invited me to dinner, apologizing for the shortage of food in their house. The woman told me a little about her last visit with my mother, who had shared her worries about how I was doing in the far-off village. They had also discussed my sister, but neither of them had any news about her. Martha had stopped coming to the factory recently; apparently she had followed her mother and my sister to her relatives in the village, and now it was only a matter of waiting for their return. No, the blonde woman knew nothing of my mother's plan to escape. The Jews had stopped coming to work several days before the ghetto was destroyed. She hoped nothing bad had happened to Mother, that she had been transported with the rest of them to Germany, and that she would soon return from there, safe and sound.

A heavy, debilitating weariness came over me; my head grew feverish and seemed full of lead. I couldn't refuse her offer to lie down for a short nap. I was put to bed under white sheets and fell into a deep sleep. I woke up only toward noon the next day, my body burning. To my great shame, it was clear, that I was not in the best of health. This was not the time I would have chosen to appear weak. I was uncomfortable now, of all times appearing weak and in need of compassion from people. Before the war I was constantly ill with a sore throat; they had considered removing my tonsils. During the war, amazingly enough, my illnesses had disappeared. This time, too, I would have preferred to ignore my fever, but a swelling in my groin indicated an infection—the cuts in the soles of my feet, received from the barbed wire in the battlefields a couple of weeks before, had swollen and become infected.

My hosts expressed concern for the neglected state of my wounds and began treating them with what means they had in the house. And so my short visit with these Lithuanians turned into a stay lasting several days. Hallucinating with fever, I lay on their sofa in the guestroom, trying hard to make polite conversation or to leaf through old German journals, constantly falling asleep. I hated to trouble these good people, and I was aware of the diminishing store of food in their house.

On the third day of lying abed sick, my condition improved and my fever subsided. Like a wounded wild animal that slips into the forest upon healing, I hastened to take leave of my generous hosts. Tottering and weak, I left their house and never saw them again, although I continued to send and receive greetings through old Maria. I have been looking for them for years, now, but have not succeeded in tracking them down.

I returned to the "Jewish courtyard"—the public kitchen where the survivors congregated. The place drew people like a magnet and swarmed like a train station platform, with newcomers always arriving. The place had an intoxicating atmosphere, like a never-ending ball. An objective observer might imagine it was a theatrical performance, a Greek drama or tragedy being played outdoors. The inside courtyard of the soup kitchen and the entrance way leading to the dining room on the second floor were an improvised stage where people came and went at all hours of the day. As in a dream, incredulously, people would find one another—neighbors, friends, and sometimes, if much more rarely, even family members. There was no end to the excitement, embraces, and tears. Some incessantly told their stories and the miracles that saved them; for others, their downcast faces, impassive and closed, spoke for them. Everyone who came here saw himself, at first, as the only survivor, the last remaining Jew. Now, upon meeting other survivors, they wanted first of all to hear from loved ones and unburden their hearts. There were no objective observers here; it was a stage for participants only. Everyone present was alive, excited, tearful. . It was as if only here, in the narrow staircase, that they could begin to digest what had happened to them, and began the long process of facing reality. The more I heard about things that happened, about deaths occurring even at the last minute, the more my wonder at my own survival grew. Only now did I begin to grasp the miracle that had kept me alive.

The days were warm and long, the last days of August. New faces appeared and old ones vanished. Some continued to wander, some joined the army. I was one of those who stayed where he was – after all, I had nowhere to go and I was comfortable where I was – with the adults I felt I was an equal. Among those gathered there I had a special status, I was a focus of interest, the recipient of restrained and painful craving – a child, one of the few who

were saved. The camaraderie of survivors enfolded me, and I let myself sink into its embrace with longing and eagerness. Every day I returned to the kitchen.

One of these days—I thought to myself—I will go to the ghetto.

The city was still in chaos. A sense of impermanence and uncertainty ruled. From time to time—especially at night—sirens and anti-aircraft guns re-awakened, and many people still feared German counter-attacks. My forays into the city revealed many signs of destruction, the result of bombing by both sides; the facades of magnificent buildings had been turned into hollow displays, hiding only burned rubble behind them. Here and there, an entire building was no longer in a row of houses, like a fallen missing tooth. Across from the city museum, with the statues of lions where I used to spend many afternoons as a child, there was a building whose front was gone on all four stories, as if a butter knife had sliced it off. But on the front of the curved colonnade of the courthouse, the legend

JUSTITIUM EST FUNDAMENTUM REGNORUM —

Justice is the foundation of authority – continued to stand like a bad joke. When I was small I used to practice reading Roman letters using these words. Every night I slept in different quarters, tagging along with people who invited me to join them. Most of them were young people coming in from the forests or rare hiding spots. Friendly and hospitable, they heaped unlimited affection and attention on me. Some said they would have liked to adopt me, a kind of substitute for the little brother they had lost. The dwellings were full of all manner of good things, even though Lithuanians had managed to rummage through them during the first days. Preserved food, sausages and cheeses made every evening meal an extended feast.

Scene: We are talking and eating a hearty meal around a makeshift table heaped with food,. A pleasant young woman is unburdening herself—what is she to do? On the one hand, she wants to enlist immediately as a military nurse. But they told her she would have to serve on the firing line —this is the first time I have heard the term—where it is very dangerous. What is more, the front is bound to move farther and farther away, and how will she be able to check for the possible return of her family, for whom she is waiting here? I, the eleven-year-old boy, heave a sigh as if it were up to me to decide the girl's

course of action. Like a thoughtful old soul I say, "It's truly hard to say what you should do, there are pros and cons either way." The girl laughs and praises me—"What a wise child you are." And I think of my mother; she would certainly have been proud of me. *End of scene.*

Gradually, Jewish partisans who had fought in the forests began trickling into the city. Most of them were young, with noncommittal expressions, older than their years. They went around in groups, smoking heavily and holding tight to their weapons, most of which had flat cartridge magazines that looked like plates attached to the gun barrel—weapons they had used to kill Germans. Again and again I asked about my mother—perhaps she had escaped to them at the last moment? Many knew her from the days of the ghetto underground, but they had not seen her in the forest.

I was entranced by these weapon-bearing fighters. They seemed to me proud and strong. I amused myself with the thought of joining their paramilitary troops, serving like the young boy soldiers I had seen on the front. Every once in a while one of the partisans would be alerted to rescue a Jewish child from a monastery or from a Lithuanian family that refused to return its ward. There were also whispers about vendettas and acts of revenge that they didn't hesitate to perform against Lithuanians who had it coming to them. Some of the partisans devoted themselves to locating Jewish children; among them were Malka Smoli and Sara Nishmit, whose published memoirs mention me.

One of Father's stories tells of two nuns who refuse to return the Jewish child entrusted to them, until finally he is taken from them by force while the child kicks and screams, not comprehending the new outrage befalling him. As the military vehicle recedes into the distance with the child, the nuns persist in running after it, undeterred. When I read the story, I didn't know that it was based on a similar case that had actually happened to a member of our family.

There was little evidence of any special effort to restore the abandoned homes of our people, but here and there people were making their first efforts to resume normal lives. In the streets I met the long-legged Perkele, one of the ghetto youths I knew, who was older than I by several years. He had been one of the few who, on the transport to Prussia during evacuation of the

ghetto, had jumped from the train and survived. After roaming the forests and villages, he had returned to the city soon after liberation and was living alone. He invited me to his place—an abandoned flat, which he had turned into a complete and cozy abode. I envied him his independence and his sense of calm. Among the books I found in his flat was one written in Lithuanian about stern and arthritic old Lord Fauntleroy, who had adopted a poor and homeless boy as his child and heir. Was it only by chance that this story warmed my heart and stayed in my memory for many years? I stayed overnight with Perkele, who offered to let me stay and live with him, but I did not yet feel ready to remain in one place.

How long did I wander about on my own? I suppose it was for two or three weeks, perhaps even less. But I recall the period as a long and special one.

One day while roaming the streets, I met a friendly Russian soldier and struck up a conversation. He took an interest in my story and, on the spot, said that he would take me to his mother in Moscow. There I would learn to play the piano in the conservatory, just as he had done. His mother was a wonderful woman, he said, who would gladly take me into her home. How he came to know of my secret wish to be a musician I do not remember. I was entranced by his suggestion that I travel to the big city, the fabulous and distant Moscow, that I join a warm family—and learn to play the piano in a conservatory, too! He told me that music studies were very common in Russia and that the government made it possible for every child that showed a talent to enroll. These ideas were familiar, too, because Mother had promised me such a future long ago.

For an entire day I went around with the blond soldier and his companion, and everywhere he presented me by stating, I'm adopting this boy and sending him to my mother in Moscow. I was captivated for a while; the temptation was so great that I suppressed every feeling of doubt or hesitation. I was again the abandoned pup latching on to any passerby who showed a friendly interest.

In the course of the day we stopped at near the partisans' command post. They sprawled in restaurant chairs on the sidewalk as if at home. When the soldier announced his plans for me here, someone took me aside and threw cold water on my enthusiasm: "Boy," he told me, "why go all the way to Moscow with strangers? Better you should stay here with us partisan Jews." I

didn't know what to decide. When the soldier failed to appear the next day at the place we had appointed with much ceremony the evening before, I went to the partisan command post to explore the possibility of joining them. The commander listened to me attentively and suggested that I come back the next day. For several days I persisted in appearing there to find out the news regarding myself, and each day I was given the runaround, until one day I returned to find them gone.

One day after my foot had completely healed, I went to the ghetto.

On the way there I must have stopped at old Marija's house, descending from there by the same path I had climbed a few months before. The path I had taken was now a wide paved road, along which there now stood, over the route my boat had taken across the river, a gigantic wooden pontoon bridge bedecked with flags and slogans.

High dirt ramps connected the bridge with Varniu Street on the far bank and the path in the valley from this side. At the entrance to the bridge stood a plaque stating the number of the engineering unit that "erected this bridge in record time to allow the brave troops of the Red Army to pursue the Nazi animal to Berlin." Below it was hung the placard of the battalion, with pictures of two soldier-builders, Stakhanovites, in a special frame, so honored for their outstanding personal efforts during the construction of the bridge.

I was reminded of a river festival to which, once, I was not allowed to go, Father's punishment for not having returned home on time. The next day in school they told me how festive riverboats had made wide dizzy circles in the water, accompanied by orchestras and cheering crowds, sending colorful fireworks high into the sky, joyfully tooting their horns. All my friends had gone, and I remembered my disappointment for years.

I walked over the bridge, approaching the other side. The bridge rose high, joining with wonderful simplicity the two banks of the river, taking me directly to the start of Varniu Street, where the gate had stood through which I had left a few months before. A strange sight met my eyes—the wide expanse of the ghetto, which I thought once was infinite, had narrowed. The space that was once packed with scores of streets whose names I knew by heart, the hundreds of houses whose images were etched in my memory, had been

turned, incredibly, into a lot a few hundred meters across, you could see from one side of it to the other.

And what was on the other side of the empty lot? Lithuanian houses. Finished, painted, lace curtains stretched across the windows, perky flowerpots perched on the windowsills. They now surrounded and closed off the ghetto in a tight, dense row, like people standing around an open grave. The storm of fire that had raged here stopped beside them and left them intact.

I came closer to the rectangular lot of the former ghetto. I was already familiar with scenes of partial ruins. But here, within the ghetto, the destruction was complete. Almost nothing remained standing, neither wall nor roof. Only chimneys. These, miraculously stayed upright and intact, lined up in rows like tombstones. Made of brick, they were all that survived of the combustible wooden houses. Their bases began with smashed kitchen stoves, their tops were high in the sky. Stripped of everything that enveloped them in the houses of living people, they stood upright in the ruins like sentries frozen at their posts. Surrounding each chimney was a heap of rubble. Pieces of walls and doorjambs, twisted tin roofing, skeletons of steel beds and oven ranges crumpled by the heat. Further away lay everything that had been thrown in the air, left where it had fallen—single shoes, quilt feathers, torn letters, scraps of clothes. The ruins of human habitation, with all its signs and marks, lay strewn about—once the soul of the house had expired—like spilled guts.

Since most of the houses in the ghetto had been houses of only one or two stories, their ruins didn't amount to too much. This was not the case, however, with the glory of the ghetto—the large apartment complexes. The ruins of these buildings formed veritable hills. I stood and looked. The last time I stood there I had seen Zelda crossing the street. This time I found a scrap of the Torah vellum lying in the dust; I picked it up and took it with me.

Human body parts showed through the ruins here and there, the remains of those who tried to escape from their houses—they may even have reached the fence—but were caught, their bodies thrown back into the flames and not completely consumed. There were also whole bodies, bloated like big round drums, crammed into the opening of a cellar where the staircase had collapsed, as if they were still striving to break out of the fatal trap that had

closed over them. Many other corpses remained hidden deep in the rubble, where only the smell of their slow decay rising from the ground, a heavy, unbearable stench that hovered for a long time over the dead, revealed their existence in the days to come.

Could my mother's body have been among them? The possibility never even entered my mind.

But there were also those who remained alive, thanks to the *malinas*. My friend Alik and his mother, and Bashele and hers were saved this way. Fortunately, the tunnels of their *malinas* led to empty lots or to a ruined glass hothouse, where the tongues of fire didn't reach. For about two weeks they were confined without movement in their hiding places before they were able to crawl out, feeble and dehydrated, into the arms of their liberators.

It was not hard to find our house at Vigriu 44, since the house was on a corner lot. I found the remains of our closet in the corner, as I have already told. Later, I found a stack of family pictures at the foot of the staircase, about a dozen photographs that stuck together and survived by a miracle on the ground near the cellar entrance—the same cellar that had saved my life a few months before and that had somehow survived the waves of destruction unscathed. I cannot explain how these photographs—pictures of our family, no less—reached this spot and escaped the all-consuming fire that raged all about, as if my mother herself had placed them there six weeks before, just as she used to leave lunch ready for me to come and eat. Perhaps an explosion or a burst of flames had propelled the bundle of photographs out of the burning wooden closet towards the steps and out of the range of the fire. With trembling hands I took the pictures, hoping to keep them with me for a long time to come.

The ghetto had been emptied of houses and of people, and I found this hard to believe. Where were they all, all my people? I thought of the gloomy folk song my mother used to sing about the faithful shepherd, "Dos Pastechel," who wanders the wide world over looking for a beloved sheep that he has lost, everywhere believing he has found a part of its body—limbs, bones, and teeth—and nowhere finding comfort.

*S'iz geven a mol a Pastechl, a Pastechl,
 Iz im farlorn gegangen zein einzike shefele
 ...geht er, zeht a fur mit shteindelech,
 hot er gemeint az dos iz fun shefele die beindelech;
 zet er a fur mit deinerlech,
 hot er gemeint az dos iz fun shefele die hernerlech;
 zet er a fur mit niselech,
 hot her gemeint az dos iz fun shefele die fiselech...*

(There was once a little shepherd
 Who lost his only sheep
 He sees a wagon full of stones
 And thinks they are its bones
 He sees a wagon full of thorns
 And thinks they are its horns
 He sees a wagon full of nuts
 And thinks they are its hooves...)

I went down to the graveyard on the riverbank. There were the old graves with improvised tombstones that I had known from before. Among them I seem to recall one carrying a single short name, "Mek". On the edge of the field there were now long, fresh piles of dirt, evidently gathered there during recent days. Lacking tombstones, the mounds were mute, keeping their secret.

... And perhaps reality was otherwise. The hundreds of houses and thousands of rooms in the ghetto are perhaps still standing, humming with life as before, and only I have returned, a ghost from another world, trying to regain my former place and finding the way blocked as in a nightmare; unable to find the entrance, unable to start a conversation with the inhabitants; no one can hear my calls. A soundless, invisible barrier divides me from my loved ones, and I cannot surmount it.

And unlike Jeremiah or Job, I could not throw myself on the ruins, wear sackcloth and ashes, and lament my destroyed world. Only a long sobbing cry came over me there where my house at Vigriu 44 once stood. To this day my

great lament pulses in my breast, accompanied by a strong sense of belonging. I am still from there.

I crossed the river several times to return to the ghetto territory. After the first visit, I remembered the washtub that Mother had buried. On my next trip I began scrabbling where I thought our corner of the shed in the yard had been; a bad odor still hung over the place. And indeed, after a little digging, I was excited to encounter a tin object. I wasn't strong enough to remove the entire tub, and only dislodged the lid. Most of the contents had been reduced to charcoal by the terrific heat that raged above it. The small wooden board was in place as Mother had left it. And although it was baked at the top of the treasure, the writing could still be read thanks to the glistening lead of the chemist's pencil. I was excited by the discovery, and at first I was inclined to cover it back up and postpone removal of its contents to another day. But there were many signs of snooping and digging in the area by Lithuanians—it was said they had found not a little plunder there. I feared that if I covered the tub back up, others would discover its traces and scatter its burned contents on all sides.

Another Jewish boy happened to be there, and together we hoisted the tub from the dirt and ashes. I loaded it onto a big board and, like a persistent ant, dragged it and its contents—I believe someone helped me part of the way—into the city, to the home of the Lithuanian woman across the river. There I left it as it was for a long time before returning and taking it with me. In another trip to the ghetto—the visits were never easy, not even in terms of reaching the ghetto by way of a long, tiring walk through Green Hill and over the bridge—I came back and wandered through the ruins surrounding my house, unwilling to let go. Perhaps I would find something where my friends' destroyed houses had stood—Johann of Innsbruck's microscope, chess pieces, or the board for our button football game. I even imagined I might find my tall friend's stamp album, a present from his uncle and the envy of us all. I was looking for traces of my friends.

I also recalled the child-like burial of goods that my tall friend and I had once performed, and went looking for the zeppelin we had hidden. I found his yard without much trouble because it was next to the fence, beyond which the

Lithuanians lived. And since we had buried our treasure in an open yard, it had neither been consumed by fire nor covered by debris. I now began, showing off a bit as I did so, the same ritual we had performed at the time of burial, counting off steps in different directions. While performing this ceremony, I noticed a movement behind the curtains in the house across from me. Not a minute passed before a Lithuanian man and boy appeared beside me, offering their assistance. I thanked them and said I could manage alone.

The man went on to say that he had saved a Jewish woman from the ghetto and married her. I kept on digging; he watched. His amazement knew no bounds when he realized that all I took out of the hiding place, which I found easily enough, was a child's toy. I left, but from some distance away I saw him leaning over, continuing to dig. I wondered whether his wife was really Jewish or whether he had made up the story merely to gain my trust.

I once saw a movie in which a child from a distant planet came to earth, to live among men like an ordinary mortal. But for a piece of metal that he kept in his pocket, no one would have believed, not even the child himself, that he had had another life. Among the burned ruins, I found a rusty tin zeppelin, and near our house I found locks. But a key as to how to go on living without Mother—that I never found there.

A song: When I run into difficult times and my spirits are low, I find myself unconsciously humming either a song about a deck hand on a ship in stormy seas (by Gorky?), or the last verse of the ghetto's brigade song. I feel the need to print it here—it is unquestionably part of the special piece of metal that I had saved:

*"...Mir welln doch derleben, brider,
Unser friling, unser zieg,
Un oysgleichn weln mir die glider,
un shafn unser freiheits-lied!*

*Yiddishe brigades
Oysgeputzt in lates
Marschim mit freyd un glik—
Zu zeier heimatland zurik! "*

(Our day of victory is coming, brothers
 Spring and light will not be long
 We'll stand till then and raise our voices
 And sing anew our freedom's song.
 Jewish brigades
 Decked in patches
 Marching in joy and luck
 to their homeland, back!)

At The Dieners House

Where is my sister? In August of liberation year she would have been seven years old. Mother was clearly not in the area; perhaps she was in the camps. But my little sister was supposed to be in the vicinity, and she should have been the first person I met within the gates of the city. Yet she wasn't there. My Lithuanians believed that, like many others, Martha's family had removed to the country until the storm passed. So I waited.

There was once a little shepherd

One day, near the soup kitchen, a couple stopped me and started up a conversation. I had met the man the day before. Who are you, boy? How were you saved? What do you know of your family? These were questions I was used to answering. The couple exchanged glances during our talk. They also asked questions about my family abroad. I named uncles in the United States and my rabbi uncle in the Mazkeret Moshe neighborhood of Jerusalem, whose address had stuck in my memory from a New Year's greeting he had sent.

We then said good-bye and separated. A few hours later I met them again in the same place. This time, after a few polite words, Nahum's face took on a ceremonious expression—in years to come, I came to know this bright look of his, which always preceded the telling of a secret or announcement of what he considered momentous, significant information —and with pronounced hesitation he said, "There's something we wanted to ask you this morning already, but we decided to think carefully about it again. Would you join us and come live with us?"

He went on to say that the thought had not left his mind ever since the day before, when he had first met me. He had gone home and told his wife, Magda, and they had come here together this morning to have a look at me together. After they had gone back to talk the matter over, they had made up their minds about making the offer.

Seeing my discomfiture, they told me a little more about themselves. They were a young and childless couple from the ghetto who had been saved by hiding in a Lithuanian friend's flat during the past year. Nahum was a lawyer and was about to win a very respectable position—chief notary of our city, a post with status and many privileges. He would receive a good salary, a handsome and spacious apartment downtown, and superior food rations—so they would have no trouble taking care of my needs. They realized that I was waiting for the possible return of my family, which they wished with all their heart to happen. But meanwhile, or if God forbid my wishes didn't come true, I would be as welcome to them as a son, their own child for all intents and purposes.

They spoke more, particularly Nahum. They were obviously moved by the bold step they were taking. They dwelt in detail on the apartment they would be receiving, how I would have a room of my own and would lack nothing. At summer's end I could start school again and start making up for the considerable gap created by the last three years. And they added, to my great discomfort, that I would be their only child, as they had no thought of bringing children into the world anytime soon.

I didn't know how to answer them. I had received similar offers before theirs—"Boy, what would you say about teaming up me? As soon as I decide whether I'm staying in town, I'll come and get you." War was still raging not far away; everything was in flux; illusions and hopes bubbled over and filled the air; and as for myself, after months of being on my own, I was comfortable with my current fluid state, free of commitments. Like everyone else around me, I was suspended in an indefinite state of waiting, and I made no long-term plans. I had a roof over my head and plenty of food, I was accountable to no one. The image of a carefree vagabond suited me, like the one in Kulbak's song that Mother used to hum. At night he would end up in some remote village, in a roadside inn somewhere, sleep by the well, and rise up in the morning "wie a

hon a naser," wet as a rooster—the expression always amused me—but happy with his lot. I was a young and independent beggar, and I liked it.

The look on the Dieners' faces was grave. I replied politely—their offer made me uneasy; in a few days I would let them know. I had no wish to offend them. They did not press me—in any case, the new apartment would be theirs only the following week.

A few days went by and I put the matter completely aside; I may even have forgotten about it. One day I met Nahum again, entirely by chance, and he reminded me that they were still waiting for my answer. I hesitated, conferred a little with young people with whom I was staying, and I believe I went to see my Lithuanian woman as well. In the end my decision to accept the offer came about largely by chance, since the people that I was with were about to leave their flat anyway, and I would have to find another place to sleep. So I agreed with the Dieners that I would try staying with them for a month, and that I would join them in their place the next afternoon.

That same morning I returned to Marija. I probably did so at Magda's request to collect underwear and other clothes for myself, and I probably went as well to get her blessing. At the time, and in those circumstances, my latent feelings of belonging were transferred onto the elderly Maria and onto Daugela in the country—Mother had handed me over, however indirectly, into their hands.

I turned back to the city with my rather heavy bundle, which also contained a book or two. On the way, however, the most embarrassing thing happened to me. Already when I left Marija's house I had felt pressure in my stomach, but I had ignored it so as not to be late for my meeting with the Diener couple. At some point I could not control my bowels any longer, and to my great shame I messed my pants. What would the Dieners think of me? What would I do with my disgrace? Would they believe that I was not usually a little *scheisser*?

To my surprise, Magda was a good sport about my accident. When my friend Amos, a psychologist, heard about this opening episode in a new period of my life, he claimed that it was not a random accident at all, and that I should not lay all the blame on my intestines.

Nahum and Magda's flat was on the fourth floor of a modern downtown building on the river. Formerly, a family of senior German officers had lived there, as could be seen by the nice furniture, the many clothes in the closets,

and the cupboards overflowing with food left behind. This neighborhood too had its share of the war—in the courtyard, just across from the interior windows, there was a building like ours in size, burned and half in ruins as a result of a direct hit. For this reason, the yard was full of broken bricks and glass, and was unfit for walking in.

With the Dieners came Sophia, in whose house they had hidden and had consequently been saved. They insisted that she move into their modern apartment with them as a kind of symbolic reward for her noble deed.

Magda came from Budapest and had a decidedly western European education. With Nahum she spoke German mixed with a little Yiddish. She had landed in our area entirely by chance and very dramatically, arriving from Hungary with a young husband for a vacation on the Baltic Coast.

There, one summer not long before the war, she had met Nahum, who was many years her senior, a brilliant lawyer just then returning from his studies at the Sorbonne. Their passionate affair led to divorce, marriage, and settling in our city, all just before the war broke out.

She did her best to be proper and generous with me, casting our relationship in a familial mode. At a certain point she suggested that I call them father and mother, even trying to persuade me that doing so might do me good. I declined—I was unwilling to betray the memory of my parents in return for material gain. My conscience gave me enough trouble just for agreeing to move into a strange family as a son.

It was odd for me to return, after four and a half months of being on the move and in hiding, into the peace of house and home. I was like an alley cat being tamed. I went out a lot, back to the soup kitchen and other places, meeting and mixing with people. I came back to my room only at night. To the credit of my hosts, I must say they did nothing to stop me, and they tried to cultivate their idea of good manners—Magda's ideas, more accurately—only gradually and with a great deal of patience.

She had the manner of a refined aristocrat; next to her, I was rough, messy, stubborn, and scruffy. Though she was quite tolerant, she seemed to me at times a dictator. She made me wash my hands before meals, brush my teeth, make my bed, and help her with the dishes in the kitchen. I readily saw myself as a Snow White being persecuted by a cruel stepmother. I needed much

more than good house manners, and it was beyond Magda's power to give me what I had lost. At night I prayed and longed for Mother, hoping she would return and get me out of there. During childish fits of rage, I enjoyed the idea of secretly escaping: I would run away to Marija or to the man in the country, and no one would ever know where I was.

I would lie awake in bed, anxiously following the buzz of airplanes that still filled the night skies. Watchful, I waited for the sirens to sound. Most of them were Soviet planes moving west to discharge their cargo far from the front. From time to time came the familiar sound of anti-aircraft guns opening fire. Because we had been warned that in case of a gas attack, a special alarm would be sounded using bells, my heart would sometimes skip a beat to hear a hammer beating an iron anvil at night, sounds that burst out of a garage that worked all night. The nearness of this shop to our house troubled me very much. What would happen if German bombers returned?

The nights. Little by little, a fatiguing pattern of leafing through past pages began. Even as the days in this new reality grew more peaceful, so the nights reverted to bygone times, their nightmares and fears. I suppose that as long as I was on my own, I was also on guard, and the shadows were pushed aside. Now, with the warmth and comfort of a home came a bit of a thaw, and the price of relaxing was steep. I would wake up drenched in sweat, choking, groaning, shaking. A weary round of escapes and flights ensued, in all of which I was a hair's breadth away from the clear, unquestionable doom that lay in ambush around the corner. Aktion followed Aktion, each aimed at me and at me only. I was like a victim of recurring fever that must run its full course before I could get over it and become strong, and the Germans filled my dreams until there was no more room, and would not leave me alone.

Sometimes I would wake with Magda beside my bed, trying to calm me, shaking me out of my world of heavy sighs. This lasted weeks, months, and only gradually subsided. Reality grew stronger, the demons moved aside and seemed to be banished from my life.

Then Lazer joined us, a relative of the Dieners and our neighbor in the ghetto, and now the nights were filled with his groans. Alone and defeated, he was unable to bear—at least, not at night—his burden of sorrow and the pain of losing his baby during the *Kinder Aktion*. Through his cries I relived my own

troubles, the suffering of this bereft father filled my own heart with secret sympathy.

The nights. How I suffered, yet they were perhaps the most important thing that happened to me that year. Shlomit, too, beside whose memories of being saved my own pale in comparison, says that she remembers the first months after liberation as being harder than the terrible preceding years. The realization: the new reality of being alone.

The days, by contrast, continued to be full of excitement and happenings. People came back to fill the half-destroyed houses; additional survivors were seen abroad in the city. The radio would sometimes play congratulatory government announcements by the illustrious Jewish broadcaster Yuri Levitan, informing us of a great military feat, a huge advance at the front, the destruction of a large pocket of encircled Germans. At the same time we continued to hear news of new mass graves being discovered and of concentration and death camps being liberated. We continued holding fast in stubborn expectation.

The city slowly regained its strength. The supply of electricity became more stable, and movie houses began opening up, although only for one showing an evening. Streets were cleared of debris, and more and more of them were opened to traffic—much of it the work of German prisoners-of-war. Every morning they could be seen marching through the streets under heavy guard, like our own brigades some months earlier. Miserable, worn out, wearing crumpled caps, dressed in rags and heavy, buttonless military overcoats. Their pathetic appearance, their servile expression, filled me with acute embarrassment, mixed with loathing. Were these weaklings the same that only yesterday had lorded it over us, the source of last night's dread?

Every celebration in the city found an enthusiastic sympathizer in me. So it was with the entrance ceremony of the Lithuanian Division, which had fought in the Soviet ranks. By means of this festive procession, the authorities hoped to emphasize the positive part Lithuanians had played in the large war. Many of the soldiers were Jews, some were escapees from ghettos who had fled to the forests and joined this division. The battalions paraded through the main street of the city, the boulevard whose length I had once traversed with my mother. Crowds stood on both sides, cheering and throwing flowers. I

gathered flowers that were strewn on the street, fashioned them into a wreath, and offered them, with feeling, to an officer riding his horse at the head of his company, saying "thanks." He leaned down from his horse, took the wreath from my hand, kissed the top of my head, and said a few words. For an instant our eyes met and I knew that he, too, was Jewish.

Our city lay at an important military crossroads. Forces streamed endlessly through it, headed west. One of the posters that stood out from the rest showed a Russian soldier checking the soles of his boots. The caption under him read, "They'll do until Berlin."

Monasteries and schools were filled by wounded from the front. Soldiers in white hospital smocks packed the classrooms, perched on window sills, sat in chairs on the sidewalk. Mannish military nurses dressed in uniforms attended to them, with a great bustle. Teasing, curses, and flirtatious giggling filled the air and could be heard from afar. Sometimes a military funeral would be held with great pomp for a fallen soldier. He would be buried in the public garden, with an obelisk-like monument topped by a star over the grave, and with his photograph affixed beside the name. I especially remember the splendid funeral of General Tchernichovsky, commander of the front, who was killed by a bomb in his outpost in Prussia. Judging by the photographs carried in his funeral procession and published in the newspapers, he was a young and handsome man. I thought about him with quiet pride—here was one of us in the highest ranks of the army.

But even so, deep down, lay the hidden fear of a counter-attack and the return of the Germans.

Nahum Diener, the city's notary public, kept an open house where he hospitably received notable guests, such as senior Lithuanian judicial officials, people from the Jewish community, and top-ranking Soviet officers. By that time we already had electricity and a telephone, and when winter came we had at our disposal a cellar full of excellent coke left by the Germans. Food, too, was abundant. From time to time one of the Dieners' Soviet officer friends would come in from the front, bringing military rations. For the most part, these were American canned goods with Russian labels advertising the Lend Lease program. Guests of the Diener family were graciously served good food and fine drink, with Nahum playing the host. Gatherings would last, with wine

and conversation, well into the night, preventing me from going to bed on the living room sofa. Occasionally, Nahum would get additional pieces of furniture for his house, and one day, to Magda's great joy, a piano was brought in with great fanfare. From that time on, the piano was the focal point of her parties. Magda recalled pieces she used to play, and Russian officers too tried their hand at the piano, accompanying their tender songs of longing for their homes and families.

I quickly discovered the city library, which had renewed its services, and became a loyal patron. A hunger, unsatisfied for years, craved fulfillment. I sometimes went there more than once a day, and often finished reading on my way home. The librarians came to know me and showed a warm interest in me. I was proud to see how rapidly I filled the lines of my borrowing card, and my Jewish name got inscribed in an ever-growing number of books.

A Russian major, one of our friends, would sometimes leave bundles of belongings with the Dieners. It was probably booty from Prussia destined for transport into the hinterlands, and no doubt intended for his family. I was to cause this man and the Dieners a good deal of grief. When they were preparing to leave our city, they showed me a package belonging to this man at the bottom of a closet. Days passed and the officer never came. I took the bundle to acquaintances who dealt in secondhand clothes and got something in return. Some weeks afterward, the officer arrived and demanded his belongings. I pretended not to know what he was talking about. The man went away seething with anger, and a black spot, as my mother would say, remains on my conscience.

It was a strange year, a year of awakening and recovery; it was full of pain and mixed with faint hopes—perhaps our loved ones were somewhere in the west and might someday return? How and when did I come to know something; when did the knowledge that I was probably the sole survivor in my family take hold? I received information in trickles, but never anything definite.

Friends

That fall a Jewish school opened. This was a welcome initiative of a number of community leaders, aided by the Jewish Colonel Rabelsky, a regional psychiatrist for the Red Army who devoted himself to rehabilitating the community. It was he who obtained permission to found the Jewish school and orphanage under the auspices of the municipal educational authorities. He also obtained a suitable budget and a site—a house with a large inner yard at the intersection of two principal streets downtown.

There were only a few dozen pupils in the school, but it seemed amazing to me that only three or four months after the city's liberation so many Jewish children had been gathered. Some of them were survivors from the ghetto and the surroundings; others belonged to families just returning from deep in the Soviet Union. Still others had belonged to the original Jewish orphanage; during the war, they had been dispersed to Tashkent and other distant places and had now been returned by the Soviet government.

The teachers who gradually came there were mostly survivors who returned to the city. Raphael Levin was named school principal; we knew him from the ghetto. Studies were conducted in Yiddish and since there were no textbooks, the job of preparing class material was left to the initiative of individual teachers. In my class, the upper fourthgrade, the main teacher was Berl Kahn. He would read to us the history of Lithuania and Russia from a notebook in his own handwriting and I was amazed that he could recall so many historical details from memory. We were also taught mathematics, English, and Russian.

The classrooms were on the second floor. The first floor housed the children's home, an euphemism for the orphanage; most of those who came to our classes from there were girls. Of the orphanage boys, it was said that they preferred to work as apprentices and learn a skill.

It was a decidedly odd school. Every child in it bore his or her own special burden. Possessed of minimal self-discipline, unaccustomed to listening, we were unable to concentrate for even an hour at a time. Ancient children. Younger ones had never had any schooling of any kind before. Some knew no Yiddish at all, having learned their first language from gentiles—Lithuanian, Polish, or Russian.

Some distance away from us, the war was still raging during its final year, but we gradually settled into a good study routine. We began organizing holiday parties, such as the one to celebrate the civil New Year. Not only were the pupils and their families invited to the parties, but also most of the Jewish community. There was no better place for survivors to find a little warmth than among the few children in their midst.

I immediately became a good, industrious student. And although we sat crowded, four to a bench, sharing the few books in shifts, I have no memory of discomfort. The Hebrew language was forbidden, and every Yiddish word of Hebrew origin was changed by eliminating the special forms of the final written letters.

Most important for the likes of me, besides the studying side of school, was the encounter with other children. To be once again among peers, to exchange things with them, to compare, cautiously, the load of memories. To this day I find myself faithfully preserving ties created with the children of those days. A similar tribal feeling of belonging comes over me whenever I meet another survivor.

Alik was one of the first that I met after liberation. He and his mother survived in a ghetto *malina*, and now lived in an attic on the main boulevard. When I came to their place I was met warmly by his short bespectacled mother who, in addition to all that had happened in the meantime, also remembered me from the days before the war. I returned again and again to their house—something about the presence of mother and son drew me. At the height of our friendship we decided to merge our stamp albums. And not only that, we also conspired to rob, in quite primitive fashion, a third child, by denying that he had merely lent us his own stamp album. Until his parents intervened and threatened to call the police, we were unwilling to part with our plunder.

During one of my last visits to their flat, Alik told me, with dry directness, that his mother was very ill, she had breast cancer. From then on she lay in bed and Alik took care of her. One day he met me in the hall and said, simply, "*Zi chorchlt* —"she's dying". Sounds of muted, drawn out rattling reached my ears, and I didn't dare come close. A few days later the mother died and Alik began, very practically, with a serious expression on his face—I can see it on

his face to this day—to move out of the apartment. At least he has his mother's grave, I thought to myself.

Klara was one of the girls in the children's home who came back from the Soviet Union. Warm, alert, and amiable, she had a tendency like mine to cultivate friendships and preserve loyalties. Her health was always precarious because, according to her, she drank ice water in one of the train stations during her wanderings.

Michael had not only a set of parents but another special person as well—a little sister, Estherke, the same age as my sister mine. During the *Kinder Aktion* they were saved by a double wall in the workshops. I went to their house a lot, too, for no reason in particular. Michael had a sharp memory, and it was he who helped me collect and reconstruct the words of our ghetto songs.

The person I was closest to during those days was Ettele. Her mother, Dr. Gurevitch, was the school doctor. She recognized me, reminding me and Ettele that before the war we had been together in a holiday resort. Now we studied in the same class and I gradually began going to their house until in time it became a second home. There were three daughters—Bella, the eldest; Eta, a year older than I, and Noimele the youngest, a niece and sole survivor of her family whom her aunt had adopted as a daughter. Because Dr. Gurevitch was very busy, the house was run by the girls most of the day, and very pleasantly so. It was a Zionist household, and it was clear that they would one day get up and move to Palestine. In the meantime, we sang Hebrew songs and lit Sabbath candles.

Winter left and spring came. The Allied forces invaded deep into Germany, closed in on Berlin, and the time of full victory drew nearer. Optimism could be felt everywhere. The opera reopened and performances I was familiar with before the war were seen again—*Faust*, *La Traviata*, *Pagliacci*, *Madame Pique*. At the Dieners' house these productions were much discussed and the principal singers were among the guests invited to social evenings.

An ice cream shop opened on the main avenue. True, they served only vanilla and every buyer got only a single scoop, but the long lines failed to put me off. Long ago my parents had promised me that when my tonsils were finally removed—they were the constant source of sore throats—I could eat as much

ice cream as I wanted while recovering. The operation was planned for the end of the summer when the war started, and in the ghetto I would sometimes remember with regret that I had missed the chance to eat unlimited amounts of ice cream. Now the taste of the ice cream was creamy and pleasing. Every spare penny I came by—except for book purchases—I spent in this magical store.

I grew accustomed to life with the Diener family. I stopped rebelling. Magda and Nahum had a good idea—they introduced me to Bussi Yellin, the piano teacher, and she began teaching me to play. I practiced my first lessons diligently and already saw myself, in my mind's eye, continuing my studies in the conservatory, just as I had dreamed.

Sister

The eighth of May came and the news spread that Berlin was ours and the Germans had surrendered. People filled the streets, flags waved, loudspeakers blared, Yuri Levitan read the day's orders from Generalissimo Stalin and showers of fireworks and glowing balls filled the night sky. May ninth was declared the official day of victory and during the days that followed we couldn't see enough of the daily newsreels showing the battles of the conquest of Berlin and the formal ceremony of signing the terms of surrender in Potsdam.

The reign of evil had ended. Now the detention camps would open and all the prisoners could return to their homes. Father was indeed set free during these days—a walking skeleton, 43 years old and weighing only 32 kilograms (70 pounds). He stayed in a German hospital for months before recovering. Did he hear anything about us during all this time? Having met some of our people in Dachau, he knew in a general way about what had happened in our ghetto.

And meanwhile, in my own city, what about my sister, where was she? Did I really not go immediately looking for her?

I asked about her but didn't find her. I was still unsettled and confused by the upheavals of liberation, and I was only eleven and a quarter years old, with the war still raging all around. What was I to do?

Little by little, odd information began filtering through to me; I found it hard to believe it. Who first brought it to me? It may have been the blonde woman, who continued to follow things closely, or my old Maria who told me about it. However that may be, one day I was told that the gossip on Darbininku Street was that Martha handed over a Jewish girl to the Germans and left town for a while.

At the time this rumor reached me, it produced an odd reaction on my part. Instead of going immediately to Martha's house to inquire and investigate, I held back. I avoided doing this on the childish pretext that I had better not expose myself—if they found out someone from our family remained alive, they might disappear from sight and make it impossible to place a hand on them. .

I lived, however, for seventeen more months in the city, nine of them in the house of the chief municipal notary—why did I never go to them with him, or ask him to send someone from the authorities?

I raise questions and find it hard to answer them, to understand the logic of a child's reactions. Was I not simply weak in the knees and faint of heart, which kept me from confronting Martha and her family, looking them straight in the eye and asking bluntly: —Where is Abel my brother? You were entrusted with her safety by my mother: what did you do with her, where is my sister?

Certainly I talked the matter over with Magda and Nahum. But they apparently understood better than I that what had happened here could not be put right, and there was no point in bringing it up.

And thus I stayed on in the city, living my life and waiting. Perhaps the matter hinged for me on Mother's return—when she came back she would investigate, she would certainly make inquiries. But during the nights in the years to come, it was my sister who asked me questions.

I did not try to find Peckyte during these months, either, or write to Daugela.

On one of those days, while I was sitting on a public bench, a pleasant-faced, elderly Lithuanian sat down, taking an interest in the book I was reading. I believe he was on his way home from work on trains. He seemed to be a simple man, a manual laborer. Proudly he told me that he had many books to read at home, offering to let me borrow them. I took him up on his offer, visiting him several times. Thanks to him I read Senkiewicz's trilogy, the first

part of which is the well-known *By Fire and by Sword*. He had several grown sons, who all treated me well even though they knew I was Jewish. In our first conversation, it appeared that, before the Russians arrived, they had lived in Green Hill on Darbininku Street, in Martha's neighborhood. They also knew my Maria. Upon hearing my personal story, the man recalled that on one clear summer day, a black Gestapo vehicle came to their street and picked up a Jewish girl who had been hiding, so it was said, in Martha's home. They had also seen the girl before, and since Martha was known to be childless, they assumed that she was a village relative who had moved in with them because of the war. All this I learned from a Lithuanian whom I met by chance.

On another day, a temporary house maid came to the Dieners, an office cleaner at Nahum's place of work. I struck up a conversation with her, and after she heard my history she told me the following story: during last June or July, The Gestapo had placed her under arrest for several days. There she saw a number of small Jewish children that the Germans had trapped in various places. One little girl stood out among them, slightly older than the rest, who gathered the others around her, keeping up their spirits, and leading them about from one place to another. The children were kept there for a few days before they were taken to the Ninth Fort.

And although she was unable to describe any distinguishing features of the little girl, and even though the time of the Lithuanian woman's arrest did not necessarily coincide with what I knew about the time Mother was told that Martha and my sister left for her village, I am unable to shake off the feeling that the woman had seen my little sister in the Gestapo corridors, and that it was she who had protected the other children around like a mother hen, leading and comforting them.

S'iz geven amol a pastechl, a pastechl.

Intermediate Epilogue: Misleading Tracks

One day many years ago, something happened that was like a spark in a pile of dynamite. Father came across a photograph in a Lithuanian literary magazine, showing respectable-looking people standing on both sides of a poet, a young woman who had just received a literary prize. My father conceived a mad notion that this was perhaps the daughter he had lost. What

did he see that he should have such a preposterous idea, so long after the war? Was it her round face, her imputed age, or the sound of her name, in all of which she bore a resemblance to my sister? Or perhaps the fact that she was a young poet sparked Father's imagination—corresponding to a hidden wish, a new discovery on the horizon of Lithuanian literature.

The thought that my sister might suddenly emerge from the void answered the desires of our heart. The possibility—as in a fable—that the sought-after girl was a poet, like Mother, and that this fact might have led to her discovery, gave special weight to our excitement. We disregarded the rational consideration that a girl who is six and a half years old is not likely to forget entirely the rock from which she is hewn. If she remained alive and sound of mind, she would begin, sooner or later—as happened in many cases—to inquire and investigate. And from there to our family, the distance could not be great.

We went through several weeks of great tension. Father wrote to his friends in Lithuania and I turned, through Bella, to her mother Dr. Gurevitch, who at that time was still a well-known children's doctor in our city. The partial answers, which arrived slowly, left no room for hope—the young woman in the photograph was indeed a Lithuanian, a daughter of Lithuanian parents, and there was nothing in her past to link her with the story of our lives. And so again we lost the mad hope that had arisen.

Among others, Father had turned to Shmuel, a relative who had stayed in Vilna and with whom Father corresponded in Hebrew. With his appeal, Father had also sent packages of food and clothing to aid the investigation. And even though a dozen years had passed since the events, Shmuel succeeded in finding Martha. Her husband had long since died, and she herself was lying in a hospital with cancer, on her deathbed. Reluctantly she confirmed the main points of the story—yes, the Gestapo had come and taken the girl (“on the same day the ghetto was burned,” according to her) and she did not know who had informed on her. She may have added something in rebuke of her deceased husband, who had not stood up well under the strain of those days. It is not clear to me. Many more years went by before I turned to Shmuel again—he was an old man by then, already living in Israel—and tried asking

him for details about his conversation with Martha in the hospital. But he no longer knew how to answer me.

And my friends named Martha have no idea how hard it is for me to be in the presence of their name, to pronounce it as a matter of course.

Almost a year and a half passed before I gathered the courage to enter the police station up in Green Hill. Reluctantly, I told the duty sergeant my story, a complaint against Martha's family. He promised to make inquiries and told me to return. Several weeks later, I did, but the sergeant wasn't there. The next time I found him, he told me he had been in Martha's house. He said they claimed that someone had turned them in and the Germans had come and taken the girl. "Do you have witnesses or evidence that can be presented in court?" the policeman asked me. What proof did I have except the fact that I know my sister was delivered to them and that now she was no more. Another question stuck in my throat—how was it that they escaped from the incident, without having been harmed in any way by the Germans? I left the station, assuaging my great shame with a childish rationalization—now Martha's family knew that their deed had not been forgotten, that someone was watching them. At the time I was only twelve, after all.

On special occasions, on Sabbath and holidays, I seek my sister. I have habituated myself to do without Mother, but I find it hard to bear the absence of so prosaic a possibility, possessed by others, of saying to my wife—come, let's drop in on them this evening, let's have supper Sabbath evening, let's call and find out how the boy's doing in the army and how their daughter is. The spectrum of subtle daily bonds that tie families of siblings, that gives them the wonderful feeling that they are not alone.

Like a captain checking the damage to his ship after a storm, I survey my soul, trying to gauge the extent of the stinging wounds from those days, still within me, and I find that those involving my little sister are the ones that give me most grief to this day.

Once and once only, I managed to see her during her stay with the Lithuanians. One warm day in May, in the afternoon, through the holes in the attic hiding place, I saw her from a distance, walking down the street as it curved down the slope. How did I know it was my sister? From the way the

little girl was holding the hand of the grandmother she was with, pressing close and not letting go for an instant; from the way she occasionally leaned her head this way and that, anxiously, keeping constantly on guard. An ordinary girl does not behave so.

And I could not send her a single sign of love, a small hidden signal that she was not alone. Only to look mutely on from afar, as if through a clear closed bubble, seeing her before me just as I continue to yearn for her even today.

Perhaps it is her tender age that crushes my heart - this little girl only six-and-a-half years old, and the heavy weight imposed upon her soft shoulders, cast alone into darkness among strangers. My only sister, my flesh and blood.

We both hid in the same street, ten or so houses away from each other, so why me, why me, of the two of us? Her life might have been more structured, more beautiful. Was it because I had clamored louder to urge my mother to move me elsewhere? Why only me?

Several years ago the matter returned and burst in on me again. It began with an innocent article in the evening newspaper—the story of a Jewish toddler who had been thrown out like a package through the fence of the Warsaw ghetto and was saved. Thereafter, she had lived with good Polish people who found her and raised her as their daughter in all respects. In her wrapping was a note with only her first name and her birth date, nothing else to identify her. Now a mother of children, she had come to Israel to visit and inquire whether anyone knew her origin and her identity. In her newspaper picture you saw a child three or four years of age, brown eyes, a bewildered gaze, and sad, anxious eyes. And again the same baseless hope sprang up in me—perhaps one day my little sister would suddenly show up after all.

I look into the sorrowful eyes of this former Warsaw ghetto baby, now a good-looking woman of 46, round-faced, Jewish eyes, curly black hair. Disappointed, she is about to return to her home in Poland, having found not even the beginning of a thread.

Anna Shefanovska, would you be my sister?

And perhaps—although I do not as a rule believe it—my mother and sister are still waiting for me on the platform. One day I will meet them again, and I'll be

able to apologize for the suppression, the forgetting, the neglect, for having remained alive so many years after them. Perhaps I will receive their pardon, and will finally be able to rest.

*S'iz geven amol a pastechl, a pastechl
Iz im farlorn gegangen
zein einzike shefele.*

Children's Home

The Dieners Leave

Victory celebrations were not yet over and a special atmosphere prevailed at the Dieners'. Things were packed, furniture and clothes were sold, emotional visits with friends took place, all ostensibly toward a vacation in Vilnius. But the preparations were so extensive, and the secrecy so extreme, that it was clear to me that the outing signified something more. Since I was told nothing, I pretended not to know.

My twelfth birthday was approaching. To my pleasant surprise, the Dieners gave me an early gift—a considerable sum of money. They explained the gift by saying they would be on vacation on the day in question, but deep down, their action confirmed my feeling that it was essentially a parting gift.

Already in those days there was an oppressive sense of surveillance, of inexplicable surprise arrests, and of harsh investigations of honest and innocent people. In our house there was sad talk of one of their friends, a good and dedicated man, who had used all his power to locate and rescue Jewish children, take them into his house, and gradually place them in caring families, all the while checking up on them and aiding them; and here he was suddenly arrested. A scandal broke out in the city at the time—a well-known lawyer simply disappeared overnight. It was said he had managed to get around the authorities and cross the border into neighboring Poland, where a democratic regime was in power at the time. It was said furthermore that Poland allowed movement westward into other countries in the world.

One day I left the house and, when I returned, I no longer found Magda and Nahum; they were gone. They had urged me to go to a movie, then disappeared.

I gauge again the depths of my feeling—I was hurt to be left behind like one of the objects in their flat, but in spite of the surprise abandonment, I find that I bear no real grudge. When they left I regained my independence, and part of me was happy with that. Was I not waiting for my parents to return? A warm feeling toward the Dieners has stirred within me all these years.

The Dieners sold their piano, too, so my short career as a pianist came to an end. They left their cousin Lazer to look after the house. I had been told he would look in on me during their vacation.

And so, after nine months of living together, Magda and Nahum exited my life. When I met them again, with much emotion, seventeen years later, they couldn't stop explaining and apologizing. Once they had made the decision to leave the country at the first opportunity, they had debated the question of what to do with me. On the one hand, they rather wanted to take me with them, since on their own initiative they had taken me into their house and I was their child in all respects. But other considerations influenced them against this course.

First, they were setting out on a dangerous adventure whose outcome was unforeseeable. Many of those sneaking across the borders in those days were caught and thrown into prison. And although they got across the borders safely, they faced, in the end, years of poverty-stricken wanderings, hunger and grave illness, before they settled in France, land of Nahum's dreams. There they had their son Alex, and eventually they supported themselves producing hand-made teddy bears.

Second, they were constrained to the utmost secrecy so as not to be arrested before they could leave. What is more—and this in my view was the strongest justification—it was at a time when survivors were gradually returning from the camps. Did they have the right to uproot me from this spot when there was a chance someone from my family might return in search of me? They themselves had no one to wait for. I understood their reasoning; It was logical. In practice there was no great change in my daily life. In the morning I went to school, in the afternoon I wandered about the city, which I loved doing. Lazer didn't interfere in my life—he was wrapped up in his own affairs and his own pain. He treated me with respect and managed to give me a feeling of stability in spite of the Dieners' abandonment. Before long one of his girl cousins, a

survivor, returned from the camps and came to live in his flat. We three got along well and didn't speak much of Nahum and Magda. Of the repercussions in town resulting from their disappearance I had only the faintest idea. When they were asked for on the telephone, I replied that they were on vacation in Vilnius.

Now, with a relatively large amount of money in my pocket, I was able to indulge my desire to gather and possess, and I went to the government book-store. My visits there were disappointing—the Yiddish selections on their shelves were small and monotonous—Feffer, Bergelson, Peretz Markish and the other mobilized Yiddish writers then in favor, the very ones that Stalin destroyed only a few years later. The booklets, in a uniform bluish gray cardboard binding, had plots dealing with the World War and the struggle against the Germans. I had no interest in these wearying subjects. For want of an alternative, I consoled myself with frequent trips to the cinema, the theater, and tasty ice cream cones—a lot of ice cream, until my small fund of money had melted away.

I believe that after the Dieners' defection, I began eating noon meals in the orphanage. Arrangements were evidently made by the community or Dr. Gurevitch. Since the place was next to the school, it was very convenient for me.

I was swept up during this time by a wave of adoration of the principal opera singers. I spent many hours on the lookout across from the back door of the opera house in the heart of downtown, waiting for a "star" to emerge. I imagined how I would meet the much-praised Kipras Petrauskas, Lithuania's legendary tenor, who had just returned to sing here, my bending his ear with my strong impression of his arias in *Pagliacci*, among them the famous "Ridi Pagliaccio" ("Laugh, Clown"); perhaps I would even hint to him about my deep desire to belong to the world of music.

Our flat began to attract visitors—since it was an official government residence, various candidates came to see if it would answer their needs. The possibility that strange people might encroach on my safe corner worried me a lot. But Lazer assured me that he would arrange something—no one would dare oust us from the place. He had a letter from Nahum officially conferring on him the right to the house, and he displayed this document to anyone who

came. At the same time, Lazer never hid his intention to leave the place. Just how and when, he did not say.

My street wandering brought me one day to the Great Synagogue. Before the war, on feast days and holidays, I would run about here on the steps playing with the other children while my father sat wrapped up in a tallit (prayer shawl) inside. A fine choir was stationed high up, near the great cupola; its singers sang with serious countenances, conducted by an energetic man—Gerber himself, the ghetto choir conductor. A pleasant-voiced cantor wearing a high cornered hat sang responsively or together with the choir, in a style that reminded me of operatic arias. Now the great sanctuary was locked shut and neglected, and only its back rooms held the Jewish community offices. Their people tried several times to attract us, the remaining children, with sweets, to come and study the Torah and prayers, but it was a lost cause.

On the bulletin board, among the many notes dealing with searches for relatives, I found a list of people in whose name letters were waiting in the community's offices, and there, to my surprise, was my family's name. Excitedly I went inside, where I was given a letter from America, from my Aunt Cheina - now Hellen - in New York. According to her, she had found my mother's name on a list of survivors. So she was sending this letter to our city, hoping a member of the family might receive it. I was beside myself with joy—here was clear evidence that Mother was alive somewhere, and what was more, I had discovered an aunt, one of Mother's sisters in America. I was no longer alone!

I sat down and sent back a long and detailed letter. Aunt Hellen was a superb collector. Thanks to her I now have sacred books that her grandfather, born in the first part of the nineteenth century, sent with her when she, a fifteen-year-old girl, set out for distant America. On the inside flyleaf my forefathers had written, one hundred fifty years ago, in a clear and flourishing Hebrew script, *"This book belongs to David, the son of Jehuda Greenstein of Siad."* My aunt saved my own letter, too, during all these years. I look it over and I am amazed—written on large paper in a fair and fluent hand, line after line in a pen dipped in ink, without the final "mem", "peh", and "nun", as was the custom in those years under the Soviet regime. It lays out for her a digest of the adventures of my family during the war. The descriptions are balanced

and restrained, painting a general picture of the situation. I express my joy that she has heard from my mother, whereas I, over here, have not yet heard from either Mother or Father; for the time being, I seem to be the only surviving member of our extended family. I go on to ask for current addresses of my cousins in Palestine and I make a few requests—one, that she invite me to the United States. My other requests, which I make with many apologies, are for a stamp album and for books in Yiddish: "*veil ich on bicher bin vi a fish on vasser*," ("for without books I am like a fish out of water"); thus I write, twelve years old.

I never got a reply from Hellen, although I now know that she got very excited to receive my letter. Right away she went to the stores—a widow of small means trying to raise two daughters alone—and bought me a good album, full of nice stamps, and sent it to me. The package never reached me, but when I heard my aunt's story, even many years later, I was deeply embarrassed.

One day Lazer and his cousin urged me to attend a matinee at the opera, and also supplied me with pocket money for ice cream and cake. When I returned I found that they were no longer there. Even before that I had observed, as with Nahum and Magda, that they were busy with packing and preparations for departure. And once again I had pretended not to notice anything. I believe the timing of their flight was influenced by the upcoming termination of our right to stay in the flat. This time, unlike the case with the Dieners, I was left without a pre-arranged shelter. In Lazer's defense let it be said that on several occasions he had suggested that I consider moving to the children's home, and I had refused. In any case, when he left he knew it was an option. I feel no bitterness toward him, either.

So I was once again alone.

Lazer and his "cousin"—she was indeed a relative of some kind—wandered far and arrived, in the end, at the borders of Mexico. There they married and adopted their remaining flesh and blood, Ileda, from our ghetto. Of her and her sad end I have already spoken.

What now? I do not remember being too anxious. Dr. Gurevitch may have given me the feeling that in an hour of need I could join her family—in a warm home there is room for all. Meanwhile—with the final victory over the Germans and the arrival of V-day—the initial sprinkling of people liberated

from camps increased, and every passing day was likely to bring back someone in the family. The hint of good news in my aunt's letter raised my hopes and gave me the strength to keep on waiting.

A Russian Jewish family, relatives of a senior municipal officer, came to live in the Dieners' apartment. They were evidently well connected, because at night they allowed themselves to listen to radio programs from far-away stations that broadcast in western languages. Their food in the pantry was also of fine quality. Most of the Dieners' furniture came to them, and some of it was put up for sale.

The new family, though they behaved with a certain arrogance, displayed considerable courtesy toward me. They did me no harm, and made no demands that I leave the flat, yet I felt hostile toward them. They also allowed me to keep my necessities in the food pantry. All they asked of me was to move into the small room next to the kitchen, into a place that had once undoubtedly been the servant's room. They understood something that hadn't occurred to me—that I couldn't be on my own for long. I ate breakfast in the kitchen and the other two meals outside the house—lunch in the children's home and dinner, as I recall, in the house of friends like Eta or Michael.

I privately call the next period "the big decadent period". I was a twelve-year-old boy living alone in a flat belonging to strangers. It was summer vacation, without the structure of school or other obligations. I would visit friends, go to the library, or wander about wherever I chose. I was a free bird.

My little room faced the yard. Across from it, almost within reach, a bombed building blocked the horizon. At night I enjoyed passing my water straight out of my window on the fourth floor to the ruins below. Although I found myself itching with a lot of fleas, I never once thought of sweeping or mopping my room. I would satisfy of excessive hunger attacks at night, or indefinable desires for a taste of something, with cautious snitching of the new residents' excellent cheeses and sausages. Sometimes the work of covering my tracks was hard, when I discovered the next night that the householders had not yet touched the foods I had already broken into or nibbled. My neighbors had very probably discovered my nibblings, but—again to their credit—they never mentioned it.

This period, which lasted several weeks, came suddenly and unexpectedly to an end—I came down with measles. The disease was already common in the children's home, and a special room had been designated, and darkened for the sick. One day I was running a high fever, my head was ready to split, and all my limbs were weak. For a day or two I lay alone in my small room, tossing and turning in misery, saying not a word. A caretaker from the children's home came to see me—apparently the householders called her, or Dr. Gurevitch found out about me—and she persuaded me to move into the children's ward. There I lay a number of days more, suffering and in pain, until my body got the better of the disease.

From then on I stayed in the children's home, and never returned to my little room.

The Children's House

In the ward another boy lay near me, tall in comparison to me. He had a tiny mother who sat near him all the time, laying moistened towels on his forehead. What the boy was doing in the ward at the children's home when he had a mother, I had no idea. Later I accompanied him every morning—the only two Jewish boys—to a Lithuanian school, where we became somewhat close.

Thus I ended up in the children's home against my will.

Children's Home No. 4 repelled me in many ways. In the course of the past year, in spite of having studied on the floor above it, I had never set foot in the place except once, and that was only because I received a light scratch or a tear in my pants while playing in the courtyard. The place looked to me like a shelter for the destitute and a den of misery. Unceasing sounds of bitter sobbing and unyielding quarrels rose up from below, followed by scolding and silences. All the sounds were accompanied by the sour smell of urine-soaked mattresses and overcooked food. Whining toddlers, with runny noses and droopy diapers crawled about on the sticky floor. Like stray kittens, most of them had been gathered off the streets, extracted or rescued—sometimes by force—from their shelters. Some of them had been discovered on the steps of the home wrapped in newspapers or a blanket, or had been located by dedicated Jews in distant villages or behind the walls of monasteries.

It occurs to me that, if my little sister had survived instead of me, her first station, too, would have been the children's home.

Older boys and girls lived there, natives of our city who grew up during the war in the depths of the Soviet Union—in the Ural or Kazakhstan—and had now been returned to their place of origin. Some were veteran orphans who had grown up in institutions even before the war, while others had been torn from their parents when the war broke out. Alert and crafty little foxes, seasoned and aggressive petty thieves, nothing was sacred or off-limits to them. They were capable of pilfering, lying, cheating, and informing. I was unaccustomed to such a crowd. One day I myself saw how two of them, in the entrance to a house, "shook down" a drunken sailor by whispering friendly words over his befuddled head, gradually relieving him of his coat and shoes, then taking his watch and leaving him cleaned out. I stayed as far away from them as I could, and they for their part had no particular fondness for an "egghead" like me.

The jeers and contempt they accorded me, a "well-bred boy," studious and learned, were expressed in their nickname for me, *yidene* (old Jewess-know-it-all), which stuck to me throughout the period. I was unable to shake it off even though it made me furious.

Not all of the children were violent. Some were quiet, and nicer. On the whole we had a collection of wholesome types, wizards at survival. The entire community—about forty children—was housed under one roof and was required to behave in a disciplined manner. All of them were in need of attention, warmth, and some compensation for what they had lost. The counselors and the few educators who worked with the group did not have an easy time.

In our sleeping quarters a dozen or so beds were arranged along the wall, as in military barracks, with an aisle between them. Everyone had a small cupboard by his bed for personal items. Although the quantity of food was reasonable, we prowled about with a feeling of constant hunger.

Perhaps that was why we enjoyed appearing before the wounded soldiers, of whom there were still many in the city at the time. We would recite in Yiddish, Russian, and Lithuanian, winning loud applause from the bored patients, who

had been already bedridden for months. For our part, we enjoyed the refreshments prepared for us—cake, milk, and sweets.

In the evening, the kitchen was locked with seven locks but was broken into each time anew. Our never-ending hunger came to the fore especially when food was distributed at meal time. Although the food was strictly doled out under the watchful eye of the counselor on duty, the children devised special ruses whereby, it could be whisked under the table and perched on their knees while it was being passed around. Since the portions were counted and accounted for in advance, the last to be served came up short, whereupon a riot would break out with much complaining and quarreling.

Solomina was the head of the children's home. Sturdy and firm, a loyal communist with short hair like Anna Pauker(*), she had one wooden leg (apparently a war injury), which she dragged around, while pursing her lips. She ran the institution diligently and with a firm hand. It was perhaps the right way to impose a positive educational framework on such a motley and wild bunch. She was there from morning till evening, almost devoid of a private life, and she conducted all her business with a very serious face. We hated her with an animosity usually reserved for strict school principals and, in the manner of the downtrodden, floated rather cynical jokes about her behind her back. In her way, however, Solomina was very dedicated and responsible, and she left her mark on the institution for a long time to come.

Solomina had her eye on me and made no secret of her expectations for me on various occasions. In the meantime I was one of the "October children"—the rank in the communist youth movement just before that of "pioneer". As such, we were permitted to wear our red neckchief tied with only an ordinary knot. It was our ambition to rise to the higher rank of pioneer, where we might adorn ourselves with a metal tie clasp on which was engraved, surrounding the silhouette of a campfire, "Be ready, always ready". Later, when we were older, and proved worthy, the appealing rank of *comsomol* awaited us. Like that in the heartwarming film bearing her name Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, the Soviet heroine *comsomol* who had fought bravely behind German lines. And still farther beyond the horizon waited the communist party, the *Partia*—only the best and most exalted of Soviet citizens were privileged to join its ranks. Solomina once invited me to attend a party meeting, and I was proud to

do so. We heard a lecture about the worldwide political situation, and Solomina sat at the head of the dais.

When I finally got to Palestine, I came across a picture of our choir from those days, sent by our teacher, Helena Chatzkeles, to her friend Dr. Berman, the principal of a famous high school in Tel Aviv. I am standing in the front row, with a large crew cut head, a large pioneer tie, serious face, and my eyes downcast and sad. Beside me stands the "cantor", our name for a redhead with a pleasant voice. On my other side is none other than Channele Glushak, leader of the girls. She had a beautiful voice and was pretty. Her long blond hair, gathered by a colored ribbon, fell onto her shoulders, the very picture of femininity.

They began including me in plays for adults. I played the role of a child in the sketches of Shalom Aleichem, performing to the best of my ability. I was proud that they had chosen me of all people, the "yidene," to appear in serious plays, and beside me—Channele Glushak. The plays were organized and directed by Yerachmiel Berman, who worked with us patiently and respectfully. Later I learned that Berman was one of the four partisans who during the week I left the ghetto, and after courageous fighting had managed to escape from a truck that had been stopped on its way to the forest.

The day after the first performance, which had been very well received, I was called aside and, to my surprise, given several folded-up banknotes for me and Channele—our token share of the evening's proceeds. Although they had never spoken with us about payment of any kind, it was still my first salary, and it pleased me to receive it.

I saw a film nearly every day. One special one was *The Circus*, about a black baby born to one of the acrobats in an American circus touring the Soviet Union; nobody in the circus wants the child. In one heartwarming scene the baby is passed from one person to another in the crowd, surrounded by warmth and love, and everyone sings it a lullaby in his own language—Paul Robeson in English and our Michoelis in Yiddish. We in the auditorium continued to hum the song as we left.

But I was taken more than any other by the film *Pinocchio*. It ends with a festooned ship arriving from outer space, out of which emerges a marvelous man wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. He takes the persecuted Pinocchio

under his protection, and they sail back to another continent where equality, love, and freedom prevail.

... Slowly the ship rises into the air, while its passengers sing a song whose words and music remain written in my heart, stirring me even today:

[In Cyrillic characters,]

Dalyoka, Dalyoka za morem,

I Lezhyt zolotaya Strana.....

(Far, far away, beyond the sea,

Lies a golden land)

Mother

Although life in the children's home seemed full of youthful liveliness and optimism, it had hours of sadness and longing. At those times we would seat on benches in the empty dining room, or on one of the beds and sing. Our repertoire included sorrowful Russian songs as well as our own Jewish ones.

One of the sad songs came to us apparently from the Vilna ghetto, and I never stopped singing it afterwards. Here is its refrain:

ich vil noch eynmol zen mayn heym

zu iz dort alles vi geven

ot do der taich, ot do der shtein

ot do der dach vos halt zich koym

(I wish once more to see my home

Is everything there all right?

There is the river, and there the stone

And there is the crooked ramshackle roof

I want to go home.) ()*

() Lyrics: Leib Rosenthal. Composer: Unknown*

As if by magic, I was drawn back to the Green Hill. Every so often I would leave for a visit with old Marija, go there and back again. Once, on my return journey, I visited a women's dormitory on the street that rises from the city to the mountain. In an upper story, divided into rooms, lived women survivors

who had returned from the camps. As on previous visits, I put the question to the recent newcomers whether they had seen my mother.

In the summer of 1945 prisoners from Stutthof began returning to our city, even though they had been freed at the end of January. Some of them came to visit the children's house. With dry lips they tried to frame the difficult question, which we guessed before they asked it. Some of the children would likewise report to the women's dormitory whenever we got word of a new group of arrivals. The older girls took the initiative with this, and they often came back crowing with victory—they had found a cousin thrice removed or some other distant relative, and we all envied them. It was not an easy thing to go and ask questions. In spite of that, I went there once or twice.

Deep inside I did not believe that Mother was likely to be among those who returned from the camp. She had not, after all, ever planned to leave with the evacuees—thus much she had told me herself beforehand. And if she had been taken in spite of herself, she would certainly have been among the first to return, what with having left behind two hidden children. On her return, would she have spent any time, even the smallest moment, in a dormitory for lonely women, waiting for me to come and ask about her? And so it was, not even one woman among the survivors whom I met there and who knew Mother was able to say she had seen her since being evacuated from the ghetto.

And yet this time too I entered the dormitory. They were worn, beaten down, with sad eyes; and half bald, haphazardly wearing wrinkled clothes that did not fit their bodies and that suppressed any hint of femininity. They moved like sleepwalkers, and their questions were sometimes strange mixtures of snooping inquisitiveness and aimless wonder. Whose are you, child? How were you saved? Perhaps you met my child, are there other Jewish children like you in the city? And deep within me arose a feeling of discomfort and guilt, as when I listened, after the *Kinder Aktion*, to the wailing of one woman to another.

And you, have you seen my mother? I, too, was cautious and hesitant with my questions, not a little apprehensive of the answers that might ensue. And perhaps I would meet some acquaintance, Arke and Meimke's Ruhama, or Zipporah Heiman, Eliezer the author's wife, or someone else with whom a

feeling of closeness might blossom at meeting..

From previous experience I already knew that some of the women seemed unwilling to disappoint me and would answer according to the secret desire of my heart. Yes... I believe so... indeed... I do seem to remember meeting someone just like that. What do you think—here she would turn to her friend—wouldn't that one person we met be her?

I was usually too cautious to believe such dubiously positive responses. But that day, because I was late returning to the children's home and was in for a scolding, I foolishly seized upon just such a response to justify my delay. As soon as I got back and saw the rest of them looking at me, I quickly forestalled the rebuke by relating that I had received greetings from Mother in the women's dorm, she was alive. This time the bookkeeper Hannah Brave was on duty. She became excited, hugged me tightly, and shared in my joy. The rumor spread through the rooms and people came from all sides to congratulate me. Later, I understood that I had gone too far in a contemptible sham. I began giving less weight to the news, re-interpreting it as a rumor I had heard, raising the level of doubt. But it left a poor taste in my mouth.

As the days went by, the dull expectation of Mother's return grew dimmer. But a clear and final moment of closure, like the sound of clods of earth falling into the open grave, that might impress upon me a final separation from Mother - never came. Neither had we parted properly when I stepped out of the boat, nor when she left Marija's house on April twentieth, did we. I feel the want of it to this day.

Only technical difficulties kept her

From claiming her child by signs

Writes Ruti in one of her poems.

Intermediate Epilogue - Parting

When I was a shepherd I located a little place on the edge of Harod Valley, at the top of a slope on a low hill that sits next to the hills of Ramat Yissachar and looks out on the distance. Here—so I imagined—I would someday place a tombstone to my mother and my sister.

But my life's road took me away from the valley and in any case the idea went no further.

S'iz geven amol a pastechl, a pastechl.

Some months after my arrival in Palestine, I received, in a roundabout fashion, an urgent letter from my father, who had been staying in the DP (survivors') camps in Germany. He told me to go on the 22nd of Tammuz to the synagogue and say kaddish. Thus I learned, for the first time, that Father had definite knowledge of the date my mother died.

As if in spite of myself, I did as he asked that same year and the year after, but then no more. Yet many years later, on a hot day in Tammuz—while Miriam and I were pushing our year-old first-born daughter's baby carriage through the sands of Beer Sheva—I told my young wife, very hesitantly, that at home at that evening I would like to light a candle in remembrance, and this has been our custom ever since.

And what do I know now of Mother's end, beyond that she hid in the Golach family's bunker and was not part of the transports? Later, perhaps when the Germans had begun searching and exploding shelters, she decided to come out and go through the fence, where she was shot.

Many questions emerge from these dry facts, that Father related to me some years later; He had learned them, apparently, from people from our city that he met at Dachau. But only someone who remained alive after the final stages of the ghetto's destruction could have told such an explicit story about Mother's death at the fence. Was it possible? It happens that there was an additional transport of those who had been caught in bunkers after the bulk of the transports had already left. To this day I do not know who this amazing escapee might be.

I can imagine how, with her characteristic courage and strength, Mother accosted the sentry in front of her. Intently, as one human being to another, in the pure German she learned in primary school, she pled on behalf of her two children, who weren't far away.

During the opera *Carmen*, Mother told me not to look when the disappointed Don Jose stands poised to thrust a knife into Carmen's breast. Now Mother had sent me far from the city a mere eighteen days before her own death: if I had remained at the Lithuanian woman's for another couple of weeks, I would have had to see with my own eyes the ghetto's disastrous end, and with it Mother's, too.

When Ruti told me that she witnessed the pillars of fire and smoke from the attic in her hiding place, I was filled with envy—she saw the ghetto burn.

I suppose—if the story is true—that at the last minute, Mother wanted to escape and reach the Lithuanians in Green Hill. Was she headed toward the blonde woman or Marija, or did she hope rather to find someone in Martha's house who would welcome her? Only eighteen days lay between the final evacuation and the arrival of the Russians in our city.

And during the very same hours I was stationed behind the shed about a hundred kilometers away, unaware that the prayers I was whispering were in vain. For two more weeks I kept it up without knowing that my loved ones were no longer alive.

.Intermediate Epilogue – The Last Week

[An attempt to summarize the last week of the ghetto.]

Friday, the seventh of July, 1944: Goecke informs Dr. Elkes that the ghetto will be evacuated the next day. They will all be marched on foot to Tilzit (250 kilometers away). For the weaker ones, a river boat will be arranged. Panic in the ghetto, suicides.

[The Luria family's attempted suicide fails; only their young son dies from the poison they take. They request and receive special permission to bury him, accompanied by a Lithuanian policeman. On their return from the burial, they implore him to kill them; he pulls his pistol and shoots them. The end of Luria, the Heuchermann.]

Sabbath eve between the seventh and eighth of July: Heavy bombing over the city. Widespread rumors that the Germans will leave the city by 11:00 a.m. the next day. A strong hope arises. A panic rush to the shelters, with violent struggles for a place in them.

Saturday and Sunday, July eighth and ninth: Air activity ceases, but there are no acts of evacuation. It is known that the Red Army changed the direction of invasion, turning toward Grodno-Bialistok-Warsaw.

[The weekend of Peckyte's visit to me in the country?.]

Monday, July tenth, to Wednesday, July twelfth: Brutal evacuation of all residents from their houses, concentrating them in the large apartment blocks in preparation for removal—this time using transport vehicles, apparently.

Wednesday evening, between July eleventh and twelfth: Heavy rains pour onto the people, who have already been kept outside under open skies for two days already. They are wet to the bone and very dirty; the only question that matters to them is whether they will be moved. Everyone hopes that Goecke will fail to obtain transportation.

Wednesday, July twelfth: The order to move comes at 9:00 a.m. He has found transportation after all. Five in a row, they are all marched to the southern train station in the suburb of Aleksotu. New captives are added until noon. From there they are transported in crowded railcars to Stutthof in Prussia. The men are sent, after selection, to the eleven concentration camps associated with the Dachau camp system in Bavaria, near Kaufering and Landsberg, not far from Munich.

From Wednesday, July twelfth at noon to Friday, July fourteenth at noon: Thorough searches for those in hiding; they are 4,000 people short. About a thousand people are cruelly flushed out of *malinas*, using guns, grenades, and smoke bombs.

[The night between July thirteenth and fourteenth, Thursday night, the twenty-second day of Tammuz, 5704, is possibly the date of my mother's death.]

Friday, July fourteenth, at noon: The last transport for the one thousand additional captives to Germany. From this point on there is systematic burning and blasting of all the ghetto houses and structures, along with the people who remain hidden in and under them, until nothing is left standing.

(Nineteen days later—Sunday, July thirtieth: The Red Army enters the city)

Ghetto summary:

160 weeks x 7 days + 4 more days = 1,124 days. Eighteen days between destruction of the ghetto and the arrival of the Red Army. Total: 1,142 days of Nazi rule in our city.

Among the one thousand captured, there were also about fifty children. They were immediately segregated, and the Germans threatened to kill them unless their parents revealed the location of additional shelters. In the end, the children were all shot, and their bodies were burned before their parents' eyes. The parents were then included in the last transport. This then is yet

another time that I might have died. It may also be that among these remaining children was Minele, whom I sought after liberation, but in vain.

Mother once told me a fable she heard from an eye doctor while he was removing a grain of sand from her eye, a fable about two kinds of people: those who raise their eyes and count stars, and the others who keep their eyes on the ground and collect gems.

Which of the two was Mother? She had something of both kinds in her at once. She was born, like the Messiah, on the ninth of Ab, little good that it did her. There remained for her only a few days at the end of the month of Tammuz before reaching another birthday, her thirty-eighth or ninth, which might in addition have been close to the day of our city's liberation.

Did they clean away my mother with the bodies they found in cellars and under the ruins, or had they already thrown her bullet-ridden corpse into the building burning nearby? Two graves belong to me in our city—that of my mother at the edge of the ghetto (perhaps), and that of my sister in the Ninth Fort (perhaps). And for a full year and a half I lived only a kilometer or two away, and this never entered my mind.

I never once visited the Ninth Fort. Yet my cousin Rachel, too, and Mottel's family, and the little French girl with blond curls are buried there.

And during all these years I have avoided the thought that somewhere, still loose in the world, there is a German soldier who on a July night in 1944 aimed his rifle at a silhouette trying to get through the fence, or a Gestapo agent who drew a pistol on the curly head of a seven-year-old girl. One feverish night I almost identified them among the ticket collectors on a German train crossing the Rhine Valley on my way from Switzerland to Holland, and I never went there to check. And perhaps one of them passed me today in a bus of tourists, who came with their wives to the Holy Land, marveling and taking pictures; and might the long-haired students roaming here with their backpacks be their children?

I wish at this point to end my story about Mother with a poem that she wrote about me when I was a baby one or two years old:

*Ot sitz ich oys
 Maine ovntn, yingele, nit dir.
 Derzeil ich dir a maisele,
 Zing ich dir a lid.*

*Mach ich zazkelech
 Fun shtikelech papir,
 Fun shwebelech a hayzele,
 A hintele fun leym.*

*Shpiln mir zjch shpiln
 Un kayklen zich oyfn dil.
 Bin ich izt oych a kind
 A wild un shtiferish wi du.*

*Un hert es oyf dos shpil,
 Tanzt a groyer umet oyfn dil/
 Tracht ich, yingele, un tracht:
 S'iz umetik azoy un bang.*

*Nacht arum iz tif un shwartz,
 Un s'klapt shures oys dos harz.
 S'iz a lid aza faran,
 S'iz a troym aza faran.*

*(This is how I spend my evenings,
 Child, with you
 Telling you a little tale
 Singing you a song.*

*I make a little plaything
 From a paper scrap,
 From matches, a little house,
 A little pup from clay.*

We play and play,
 Rolling on the floor.
 Now I, too, am a child
 As wild and full of fun as you.

And when the game is over
 Gray sadness dances on the floor
 I think, my child, and think
 So sad it is, and gloomy

The night is deep and black around
 The heart beats lines
 There is a song like that,
 There is a dream like that.)

(Leah Greenstein, "Bletter", Anthology, 1938)

School

At one end of the wing for little children was a small room used as a library. Here were a few Yiddish books, a ridiculous remnant of the city's treasury of Jewish culture that by some miracle made its way to this place. It was here that I found and read, in Hebrew, *Burg-Jargal*. After I came to the children's house I was made responsible for the library. I diligently wrote the names of the few books in a notebook, pasted labels on them, and made up borrowing cards like those I had seen in the municipal library. Suddenly I had a place of my own where I could be alone and do something I liked so much to do. It was here that I dragged, like an ant, the uncharred remnants of the washtub from the ghetto. I declined Meir Yellin's offer to consign its contents—or at least the charred plywood—to the museum for Jewish authors that he intended to found.

The new school year approached and I was to enter the fifth grade, one grade higher than the four grades taught in the Jewish elementary school. Something had to be done with me.

That autumn there were significant personnel changes in the children's home. Some counselors and teachers had disappeared and others had come in their place. Moishele Sherman from the partisans had joined the staff of counselors. I avoided making much of the special relationship I felt with him, a member of the underground with Mother. He was an easygoing, warmhearted person. The children soon discovered him and became attached to him. We were like a pack of abandoned pups that swarms easily around anyone who shows them a little warmth and attention. Eventually Moishele took Solomina's place, serving as the institution's second director until it closed. Years later, in Israel, at his initiative, we held a reunion for the children's home "alumni." Our second reunion, ten years later, was held in his memory.

An elderly teacher of geography and science, Helena Chatzkeles, returned from Russia and joined the children's home staff. I knew her name from before the war, when it appeared on the cover of the greenish workbooks, "The Little Green Trees," written for children. In her writings, she frequently described her journeys to far off corners of the world such as Greenland and Palestine.

Her fine skin stretched over her luminous, attentive face; her white hair was woven meticulously into braids gathered above her high forehead. She resembled a well-loved grandmother, a figure we all lacked. She exuded warmth and security in her lessons, not hesitating to tell us about her visit to Palestine and how she had walked the sandy paths between orchards in the colony Rehovoth searching for old friends.

By way of exception, and perhaps to moderate the Jewish flavor of Municipal Orphanage No. 4, one post was given to a Lithuanian teacher, placed with us by order of the national educational system. Ramonas was a generous and pleasant-mannered man who maneuvered with supreme tact in an institution whose language and mentality differed greatly from his own. I was told some time later that he was sent to prison. It was he who gave me the role of librarian, and with him I was supposed to work out a program of higher studies for myself. Faithful to the system he represented, Ramonas gave me the feeling that everything lay open to me, for after all we were living under the Soviet regime. I told him about my old dream of studying music in the conservatory, and I could even point out to him the institution I longed to

attend. The teacher promised to look into the possibility, but he was never able to bring me a definite answer. Perhaps he never took my wish completely seriously, or he found out that they did not want a Jewish child and he didn't have the heart to tell me. In the meantime, the new school year started, and I had no choice but to join the rest of the fourth-grade graduates leaving to try their luck at the Russian gymnasium.

The Russian high school was in the eastern part of the city, next to the Catholic cemetery on the way to the train station; it served the children of Russian officials and officers. We had to report there for entrance exams. This did not disturb most of the children, both because they had been in the Soviet Union during the war and because they saw nothing special in their new status. The entrance test was a nightmare for me—I had never before been thrown into such an embarrassing state of incompetence, either in understanding or answering the questions presented to me. But though my test results were quite poor, I was admitted, albeit into the lowest-level class.

I came back to the children's home frustrated. The Lithuanian teacher heard my complaint and, a few days later, arranged my admission into the Lithuanian school. From then on, that is where we went, the long-limbed boy and I, while the rest of the children continued to attend the Russian school.

The Lithuanian school, housing all twelve grades together under one roof, was situated in the city's west, in one of the seminary buildings for priests in the old quarter near our house and Rotushe. Could I ever have imagined one day studying in one of these gloomy buildings? In the Russian school I had felt great anxiety because of the language, but the children were friendly, and Slavic cheerfulness and warmth prevailed. By contrast, among the Lithuanians there was a coldness emanating from the thick walls and from the high-ceilinged classroom halls. The Jesuits still seemed to walk the halls—order, discipline, and restrained behavior were the rule. The teachers were stern-faced and serious. They acted very properly, toward us, the two Jewish pupils, since they were obliged to accept us. But we could sense a suppressed animosity.

It was an all-boys class. The day began with a prayer from which we were exempted, and already we stood out. At recess we were met with overtures of

friendliness and curiosity, together with some signs of reserve. I could always rely on my strong friend, whose large stature kept any possible attacker away. I would watch the children running about the yard, unable to suppress the thought that they had played just so during the last year and each year before it.

In spite of all the unpleasantness, this school was the best solution for me, and I was even proud that my knowledge of Lithuanian made me an equal among equals with the boys in the gymnasium. I avoided thinking about the fact that at the school day's end they all went back to the bosom of their families, and I to the orphanage. I made every effort, as was my usual habit, to "be OK." The years of heavy reading in Lithuanian came to my aid, both in the ghetto and in my hiding places. Under their influence, I identified with the Lithuanians, beyond the events of the last years, in their struggle of previous centuries against their conquerors and oppressors, the Poles, the Swedes, and others. I certainly knew grammar better than the native speakers, as is typical of Jews throughout the Diaspora. Had not my father been tested in all the university disciplines in Lithuanian, receiving higher grades than any of his Lithuanian colleagues? I recall the expression of mockery and contempt, accompanied by barefaced hatred, on the face of one Lithuanian boy who emphatically plastered me with the word *Zidas* (Jew) after pursing his lips to mimic my grammatical convolutions. He had no need of correct grammar.

How long did I attend the Lithuanian school? About two months at the most. The Christmas vacation was approaching, with all that it held in store for me. Every teacher, as usual, gave us homework to do during the break, and I was especially worried about the tasks our art teacher had imposed on us—perhaps because she had asked us to portray a happy event that had recently happened to us.

(*) the Romanian / Communist?/ foreign minister during the 1940s and 50s, who sported a typically short haircut.

Second Year / Seven Journeys

Three Messengers / First Journey / To Vilno January

My daughter (12): Dad, I don't get it any more.

How many places did you live in?

First Messenger

Things had begun already to happen during that summer. One after another people were disappearing. Aided by the repatriation act that allowed former Polish citizens to return to their country, thousands of people in the Soviet Union began moving westward, whether with authentic passports or forged ones. My good friend Michael's family went away, too, and I was left standing on the steps of their house with tears in my eyes. I do not like partings, as I have said before.

Once, while we were discussing people who had recently disappeared the English teacher, Mrs. Abramovitch, turned to me and casually asked, , "Nu—wouldn't you like to go to Poland?" I smiled—and to whom would I go? I was waiting for my parents to return. And although the question was almost certainly an innocent one, still it started something in me. I imagined that things were not entirely haphazard; perhaps she was hinting at some secret plan that was afoot, one I didn't yet know about but that included me. Some unknown person was thinking about me. And although nothing occurred in the coming days, I took heart, as in the ghetto, when Mother informed me we had a chance of leaving for the forest. And, just as then, it was as if I were touching an enchanted wall that contained within it a magical store of miraculous strength. Perhaps all was not lost after all.

And indeed, one day the Gurevitches bade me visit them in the evening, saying a man was looking for me. When I arrived they informed me, cautiously, that the man apparently had greetings for me from my father. I do not remember being particularly excited, perhaps because I expected something like that to happen to me one of those days.

I came into the back yard and there, under the shadowy arch of the gate, a man I didn't know was waiting for me. He may have had another person with him. He questioned me at length about my identity, and only after I answered satisfactorily did he extend to me a small note with Father's familiar writing on it. In angular letters betraying his effort to make them clearer, the following message was written, in words to this effect:

"Dear child, this is your father, who by miracles was saved from hellish tortures and who is now in a survivors' camp in Munich writing to you,. Do not forget your people's heritage and your family's memory. Come join me for a new life in another country. I will love you to my last breath, your father, Yisrael."

The man hinted that on some unspecified day he could help me reach Father. Was I dumbfounded, shocked? I do not believe so. It was clear to me that my parents would come back one day. I was seized with an inner joy. From the moment I read my father's note, a new era began. I was no longer forsaken and forgotten. I had an anchor, I belonged. A year and a half after Mother had cast my basket on the Nile, I was nearing my father's shore

My life had a new purpose.

As for my mother, no such message from her came from anywhere. Was she, perhaps, somewhere in the camps to the west, after all?

But I still had things to do—what would become of the charred remains of my father's journals and the other contents of the tub from the ghetto; how could I bring Martha and her husband to justice? Even so, from that day on I was filled with taut expectation. I waited for the airship that would land beside me, lift me up high and take me into the distance.

Second Messenger

One morning while I was busy playing in the children's house, I was told that a couple had asked about me in the courtyard. They had said they would return in half an hour and asked me to wait for them outside. They did indeed return after a while, called me into an out-of-the-way corner, and once again grilled me with questions before telling me, in utmost secrecy, that my father was alive and that they had come to take me away from there.

There were two of them—Kagan, a very typical looking /- Jew, with a high forehead, a somewhat lopsided face, lined with wrinkles, and one eye pulling in a different direction. Beside him—so he presented her to me—was, his relative, a young and energetic woman of Russian origin. I will call her Tanya, a name similar to her real one, which I do not recall exactly.

Kagan was a survivor from our ghetto. He suggested that we pretend he was my uncle that he had been saved and was just now returning to the city. He would come to the office to inquire about me and would ask to take me for a few days' vacation. By the end of the vacation, I would already be far away, and on my way to Father. But it was very important that I behave convincingly when we met again in public, so as to avoid any suspicion by the authorities.

And so it was. In the afternoon I was called to the office and, at the sight of Kagan, who came alone, I burst into excited shouts —Uncle! Uncle! Everyone there was happy about my discovery of a maternal uncle, and I was uncomfortable about exploiting the candor of their feeling. After a round of hugs and kisses, Kagan asked aloud, as if spontaneously, whether he might take me with him for a few days, merely to give me a little tender loving care.

They referred his request to Solomina, who gave her consent. The terms of her agreement, however, were that I stay inside the city at a known address, and that Kagan promise to return me after a week. These were the last days of the summer vacation and, as I told before, I still had to go through registration for middle school. That evening I made several arrangements, ostensibly temporary, my head spinning. I couldn't believe that the next day I would sail away and disappear.

Kagan came in the morning, and I left with him as on a cloud, without undue ceremony. Our first steps were to a nearby flat on the main boulevard, to a homey inn owned by a Jewish family. Although it was only a stone's throw from the children's home, I did not know it existed. It had several bedrooms and a small dining room where they served hot meals.

It was a world with a warm and intimate atmosphere. Jews from the ends of the earth met there, conducted business, and passed along information. Some came there looking for traces of their relatives, others for a way of escape; foreign money was exchanged and news whispered of transport over the border. Here was the brotherhood of the persecuted and the

conspirators—all together with a rich and tasty home-cooked dinner at noon that the motherly proprietress made for her guests. The table was full, it was impossible to tell that we were in the poverty-stricken state of a tyrannical despot—here all possibilities were open to those who could find the means.

At night I was given a soft, deep bed and a *pereneh*, a down quilt to cover up with, and I filled up on the homemade meals—thick soup, seasoned grilled meat, a variety of side dishes. I had never before received so much attention and pampering. I remember those meals as the tastiest and most delightful I had ever eaten.

There was also the heady intoxication of suddenly belonging to a secret and powerful organization with many Jews in it, Kagan among them. He exuded a combination of well-meaning warmth and unlimited self-confidence. In his face, deeply lined with creases, and his fiery glance and clenched jaw, there was something magnetic. To me he seemed to be a man endowed with endless qualities, as full of ruses as a pomegranate is of seeds, a man who could make the most complicated arrangements. I had longed for someone like that.

I was no longer one of the weaklings, those remaining in the city through want of choice. Now I too was among people who had access to hidden sources of power. I was now among people who took chances and strode on to new horizons, like the sailor who fought the waves in Gorky's poem.

We stayed in the inn for a day or two before setting out for Vilno, where we to had to wait until the way across the border opened up to us.

Kagan gave me the feeling that a host of secret international organizations stood behind him. I followed his guidance without making him work very hard to persuade me—I followed him, captivated, even though it is not entirely clear to me exactly how he fits into my story even now.

Kagan went back to our city to make various arrangements, and I stayed with Tanya at her place—one or two rented rooms on the ground floor of a large apartment building. Tanya's landlords were a couple of elderly Jews to whom I was introduced as a relative on vacation. They greeted me warmly and at Tanya's request stuffed me, , with food that was both good and plentiful, which I never stopped enjoying.

Short, with short brown straight hair in the style of Anna Pauker and

Solomina, Tanya had a pleasant, attractive face that guarded secrets. She chain-smoked. She let it be understood that she was a Moscovite, and her broken Yiddish lent credence to the possibility. She seemed to me to be a person with a great deal of self-confidence. During our conversations she told me she was a journalist and even dropped hints of high literary aspirations. In my case, she said, she had volunteered to help purely for humanitarian motives. She had a positive demeanor without, however, inspiring trust. At the same time, she captivated me with the illusion of being a Bohemian, a personality with connections to the world of literature and candor. Although I thought she was pretentious and something less than candid, I gave myself up to the attention she seemed to bestow on me. She would disappear at times, and on her return would tell me of delays and disappointments in executing the plan to leave for Poland. Perhaps I would have to go with her to her parents in Moscow, where I could stay for a while until the voyage was ready. I remembered a previous suggestion like it. Then, too, nothing at all had come of it.

I became quite close with the elderly couple. As soon as they found out that I was ultimately headed beyond the border, the man turned to me and said, with a pathetic air, "When you get there tell them how we live, and suffer here." I nodded my head gravely. But inside I felt deeply abashed, like one who finds himself entrusted with a task beyond his stature, like wearing the long coat when I left the ghetto. What could I, a little boy twelve years old from Children's Home No. 4 in Kovno, tell the western nations about the distress of the Soviet Union's residents?

Several days went by and I began to get used to the idea that I really was on my way to Poland. I had been delivered from the stifling framework of the children's home and would soon be able to forget forever the scorn and contempt of those who didn't appreciate me. And then Kagan suddenly came back, his face fallen and an unequivocal announcement in his mouth — the departure plans were not working out, and I had to go back at once.

On the very next day we went back to my city and I was beside myself with sorrow. On the way he told me what had happened—Solomina had met him—apparently something had been leaked to her, or her own sharp senses had

prodded her—and she had told him outright, bring me the boy back immediately, or I'll report you to the NKGB.

And since my journey across the border was cancelled anyway, Kagan was forced to bring me back. Moreover, reading between the lines, I gathered that Tanya had not done her part—Kagan's expectations of her had apparently surpassed her ability and influence.

Seventeen years later I returned to this incident when Miriam and I came to Tel Aviv to invite Mr. Kagan and his wife to our kibbutz wedding. In his face I could still discern traces of the same magnetic air of being able to do anything. He willingly accepted our invitation. This time he opened up a little and explained, "You should know that she was a criminal who tried to cheat both of us," but he said no more.

I got back to the children's home late in the evening. Everyone was already asleep. Gloomily I crept between the sheets of my cold bed, which was waiting for me. Beside it were the few things of mine that had stayed there as if nothing had occurred. In the morning I made a point of telling listeners about the nice vacation I had had in Vilno with my uncle. Solomina, for her part, never spoke a word to me about it, and we seemed to go back to normal. But it was hard for me to get used to the disappearance of the dream.

Third Messenger and First Journey

Dr. Gurevitch, upon hearing details of my journey to Vilno, discreetly said only that I should be more careful next time, and that I had better consult her before accepting enticing offers.

Meanwhile, to all appearances I returned to everyday life. After having tasted half an escape, I could no longer feel at ease. Inwardly I began preparing myself for another escape, whenever it might present itself. I asked one of the children who worked in the wood shop to make me a small suitcase out of light wooden panels; in return I gave him some of my things. In this suitcase I placed, in advance, the things I would take with me next time, unlike my hasty first exit. There was the album of ghetto seals and a few documents from the washtub. I chose documents that were likely, in my opinion, to be of help to my parents should I meet them—Father's diploma from the Lithuanian

university, and Mother's matriculation certificates from the gymnasium and nursing school. I left the rest of the ghetto treasures on the shelves of the children's home library. For years I was sorry I had not accepted Meir Yellin's offer to take these things into his care. I wavered greatly over the wooden panel that had covered the tub, on which Mother had written her words—three times I put it in the little case, until at last, with practical sobriety, I left it out.

Winter came gradually, and its ever shortening-days were filled with anxious expectation. At the time, the Gurevitches were feverishly and secretly preparing for the flight of their eldest, Bella, to a Zionist training group in Poland. Together we lit Hanukkah candles, ate *latkes*, and sang holiday songs.

And meanwhile, in the children's home, I was given a leading role in the play for the end of the civil year celebration. We had a professional stage director, an old Jew from the Soviet Union. He was a talented actor who, with his wife, successfully put on comic sketches that impressed us all. He took his job very seriously—he saw the play as a personal challenge that, if successfully met, would advance his professional career in our city. I took part in the play only because I had to. What would happen, I thought, if just when the play was ready for presentation, I had a chance to get away from there? The egregious enthusiasm of the director did not cheer me at all.

One day in mid-December, I was informed that the messenger from Poland was returning. This time he could take me with him. Was I ready? He intended to leave Vilno for Poland at the beginning of January. He suggested that when the time was near, I leave the children's home without a cover story. Because I would be leaving shortly before the time of our departure to Poland, they would not have time to look for me.

This time I talked to Dr. Gurevitch. This man seemed more credible than Kagan. He was less rattled, more open, direct; he spoke of a more definite time frame for the journey, two or three weeks from now, left us his address in Vilno, and seemed trustworthy. It was he who had brought me the letter from Father earlier. That the journey was timed to happen during Christmas vacation which would facilitate my escape; the children's home staff would be less alert.

Although the fear of Solomina was upon me, as upon all the other children, I did not feel as if doom were hanging over my head should I fail—I could say I was going to visit my uncle in Vilno. But abandoning our director bothered me—how would he react if he knew one of his lead actors was about to run away at the last moment, what kind of racket would he make? I decided to go on with the rehearsals and to look for a good opportunity to hint that he should prepare an understudy.

He was a volatile man—an odd mixture of cordiality and quick temper. Working together brought us close. Once, for instance, after having had a drink, his tongue loosened and he began describing, to my dismay, the censure and oppression he felt all around. With tears in his eyes he enjoined me to guard his secret—his desire to escape to his daughter in the west. I was glad for his candor—I would be able to tell him my own secret. But to my unpleasant surprise, when one day I mentioned that I might soon go away, he flew into a rage, rebuking and reviling me—how dare I spoil his play for him. Even so, he did not give my secret away. In the meantime he asked me to go on as before, and put me in a minor role.

December. The days grew very short. Already at three in the afternoon it was dark, filling me with a peculiar tension, like that of a similar darkness two years earlier, when my little sister left the ghetto during December days just like these. The messenger from Poland came back. We agreed on a detailed plan—I would accompany him to Vilno one day the following week. We would meet at the station and take the evening train. The twilight would also help me steal away from the children's home undetected, and we would sit apart from one another in the cars. Just in case, he drilled me on the address in Vilno where he would be staying—he reminded me over and over—near the time of our departure for Poland, January third.

During that last week of December 1945, two holiday parties were being planned in the children's home to greet the new year—one in-house, the other for the city's Jewish population. The possibility that I might leave before the parties looked more likely and more irksome to me, especially because of the inconvenience I would cause our director. The night before my departure, I finished packing my little suitcase and went to take leave of the Gurevitch family. Bella, their daughter, was already in Poland, and had sent back the

first message that all was well. They hoped I would meet her there. I went to bed excited.

A child is ever a child. The next morning, a Wednesday, I even went to the house of the boy whose parents had confiscated the stamp albums from Alik and me after we stole their son's stamps. By pleading, I managed to get my share of the stamps, while Alik's stayed with them—I betrayed the pact I made with my good friend; some day I shall have to tell him. I went back to the institution, ate the noon meal, and set out on my way. I said good-bye to no one, and there was no one to accompany me.

I got to the train station and hid at the top of the front stairs, waiting for the man. To get onto the platforms, I needed a ticket. I looked carefully around me—God forbid that Solomina should happen by. It was to this station that mother and me had returned, from the only journey we had ever taken together, a trip to visit Aunt Liba, Father's sister, in the neighboring town. All day I had played there with my cousin Rivkeleh, and in the evening we came back to the train that picked us up from a small station. For years I never stopped being amazed at how the locomotive would seem to suddenly appear as if sprouting from the earth, even though I had never stopped looking in the direction it came from, not even for an instant. Now I was waiting for my second ride on the train.

A thin iron lattice separated those waiting outside from those inside. There were not many civilians among the passengers, because in those days you needed a special permit to travel from city to city. Most of the passengers were military men or wounded soldiers on crutches, accompanied by an army nurse, on their way to a visit home or to a sanatorium. Although half a year had gone by since the war ended, many wounds had not yet healed over.

The steps in front of the station were wide. I remember sitting on the left hand side, my eyes darting to all who entered, waiting. Although I did not remember details of the man's physical appearance—I had met him only two or three times—I expected that we would recognize one another. But the time of departure was near and no one appeared. I waited as long as I could before moving into the crowd, but when the train was about to leave and the gate was less well watched, I slipped inside and ran up and down the length of the cars—to no avail. The man wasn't there.

Perhaps his plans changed at the last minute and something happened to him; why had he told me nothing? The thought that my exit had failed once more depressed me but it did not surprise me—some part of me always expected the worst.

Drained and beaten, I trudged back to the children's home. Once more I slipped back undetected into my faithful bed. How glad I was that I had avoided taking leave, since nothing came of it. Had I been wrong about the time of meeting—the day, the hour, the place? Perhaps I had once more been taken in by a con man?

The next day I consulted the surprised Gurevitch family—what to do now? Dr. Gurevitch, in her wise and reasonable manner, did not lose her composure. The man had made a good impression; something must certainly have happened. But since his departure from Vilno was still a week away, something could yet be done. She recalled that Liuba, a good friend of Bella's, was going back to Vilno in a few days. She would ask Liuba to take me with her and accompany me to the address the man had given me. If in the end my journey didn't take place, I could return under the alibi of a visit to my uncle.

Liuba agreed to take me. She planned to leave in two or three days. I even managed to play my part in the in-house party, under the suspicious gaze of the play's director.

Third Messenger and Second Journey

Early in the morning of one of the last days in December, or perhaps the first of January, I left again. This time, to avoid unnecessary mishaps, I met Liuba in the Gurevitches' home, and from there we walked to the train station. Once more I followed the familiar technique of walking several steps behind her. We even passed not far from the children's home. Liuba bought our tickets, but we entered the cars separately.

The train left on time. Recalling the days when we wandered through this suburb picking flowers on its slopes, I remembered that we would soon be going through the tunnel at the entrance to our city. The suburbs dropped behind us. As we went past Marevianke, I hummed a children's song:

Yossl iz a blinder
Hot an oyg a kranke
Kukt er oyf slabodke
Zet er marevianke
 (Yossl is a blind man
 Whose eyes are on the blink
 Looking at Slobodka
 He sees Marevianke)

Slobodka is the suburb on one side of the city; Marevianke is on the other. Liuba sat not far from me, and occasionally we exchanged glances. She was a young, pretty girl, tall with short black hair. The journey was a fatiguing one, full of stops and delays. I was tense the whole way, sitting ready by the aisle. It was only a hundred kilometers in all, but the journey took an entire day. Late in the evening, we arrived in Vilno. It was too late now to go looking for an unfamiliar address. Liuba suggested that I sleep in her flat and go look for the man the next morning. I had no reason to object, so we went to her place.

Second Journey / To Ponar / January

In the Convoy

Liuba lived in an apartment building that housed several Jewish families. And even though people were already asleep—some in improvised beds scattered in various corners—and we spoke in whispers, the rumor spread, and people came from different rooms to see the child who planned to go to Poland. Among the people surrounding me I met, to my surprise, Yaffa Braun, the black-haired one of my two kindergarten teachers, whom I had not, I believe, seen since then. The other teacher had been the blonde Sarah Stein, whom I remembered very well from the ghetto—she was married to a policeman, although that did not keep her from losing both of her children in the *Kinder Aktion*. Yaffa lived here with her elderly mother. Among the other residents was one whose name drew my attention because it was a Hebrew one—Geffen, a man of our city, a ghetto survivor, who was now a Ph.D. research worker of Chemistry at the University of Vilno and who lived in the adjoining flat with his family. He listened silently to my story. Afterwards he called me

into another room, swore me to secrecy, and with few other preliminaries told me that tomorrow or the next day an organized convoy was setting out for the border. "Why should you depend on a certain man who failed to meet you and whom you don't know at all? I can get you a place in this group," he said authoritatively.

I was a child—why should I go looking in a strange city for someone I didn't know I could rely on or who I couldn't be sure was waiting for me, when I had been offered an alternative by a man who seemed credible, who had a name, and who knew my father?

I went to sleep content. Had my absence been discovered yet? Were they already looking for me? I had not yet digested my escape from the children's home. It was good to be thrown among people I knew, to quiet the worry and the excitement racing through me.

The next morning I went out to see a little of the strange city. I was asked to be careful and I did not wander far. I returned to much bustle in the apartment—a number of those present, it turned out, were leaving that night. In the evening I took leave of my pleasant hosts. I swore that in case of any problem I would tell no one where I came from on my journey and would not reveal the address. I went to the meeting place with one of the women. On the way, she stopped somewhere to say good-bye and pick something up. There I learned by chance an important lesson in conspiracy. The woman received a secret address in Poland that she wrote on the bottom of a box full of matches. She also wrote a few other things on the back of the tin foil from a pack of cigarettes, carefully smoothing it afterwards to make it look new. When I marveled at these methods of concealment, they recommended that I too hide my important documents. Then and there they opened the seams in the shoulder pads and lining of the large coat I was wearing, inserted the most important documents, which I chose, and stitched the seams together again.

The next lesson in secrecy did not succeed. To reach the meeting point in a suburb east of the city, we hired a sleigh. For reasons of concealment, we refrained from going directly to the place, and instead got off nearby and continued on foot. But others passed us in other sleighs, stopped right outside the designated house, unloaded their bundles with much noise, and ascended the creaky wooden stairs.

Inside the house, all was confusion and excitement. Every so often the door opened and a new family entered. And though the windows were shuttered, and we were repeatedly urged to talk in whispers, nothing helped—many recognized others and discovered they were all in on the plot. Excitedly, they exchanged details of their prolonged wait, their secret preparations, their means of camouflage, and the deception each of them had practiced at their work place or with their neighbors. The immense danger in their actions was clear to all.

Crowds of Jews moving, wandering from place to place with their bundles; packs and packages of various shapes and sizes, tied in many ways, most of them carried on the shoulder or back; and in these bundles were all the possessions they had on earth, the remains of a home in a single backpack. Usually they never let these bundles out of their sight for even a moment.

From time to time, whenever someone thought they heard the hum of a motor approaching, the whispering would cease. But the hours ticked by and no signal to move came. Toward morning, it was already clear that we would not be leaving that night. We were asked to wait until dawn and then gradually to go back where we had come from.

Now that I had a few days in the city, I decided to extend my forays. Again I was careful not to be seen in central or Jewish places, since I was an escapee from the children's home. I discovered the market with its booths of hot home-style meals—something I never saw in my own city, and I homed in ravenously on a hot potato casserole.

That day I could have gone looking for the messenger from Poland. But, as I have said, I was only a child. Why should I bother to look for a man at an unfamiliar address when I already belonged to a group? I knew the people now, I was comfortable with them, and their preparations to leave were already under way.

I took advantage of the remaining days of forced waiting for two important tasks. First, by sheer good luck, I found the house of the elderly couple with whom Tanya and I had stayed, and took from them the album of family pictures that I had left behind there, the same pictures that I had found on the steps of our destroyed house. I took out all the duplicate photographs and left them with the Geffen family. The others I put in my suitcase.

The second task was going to the municipal bathhouse to bathe before setting out on a long journey. It was my first time in such a place. Most of the time I spent bathing I was preoccupied, as I had been instructed, with guarding my possessions and clothes, but when, two weeks later—to my horror—I found lice in my clothes, there was no better explanation than my attendance at that municipal bathhouse.

On Saturday night, the fifth of the month, we were called again to the same flat. I repacked my things first. With money that Geffen gave me, I bought a few articles of clothing that I lacked at the market, including a warm cap to replace the one that had mysteriously disappeared. In my little suitcase I rearranged my most important possessions: the photographs of my family, the stamp and seal albums, the collection of ghetto songs, a few certificates and a large piece of sausage—a shot of iron rations in case of need.

At the second meeting, people seemed less anxious, calmer and more at ease. For the first time I heard concepts such as Po'aley Zion, Beitar, Mizrahi, and Agudath Israel—names I had never encountered in the ghetto. Each of these bodies worked to help their supporters flee. I now know that they were only capillaries in “*Bricha*” – the flight organization that operated throughout Europe to help bring Jews to Palestine. This time, several vehicles were ready to set out, some of them belonging to the “Zionists” and some to the “Orthodox”. How candidates were chosen I do not know. That evening travel passes in our names were distributed right away, a sign that we would indeed get under way that night.

I was introduced to a couple on whose pass I was added as their son. They were pleasant people, and joked about how easily they had obtained a grown son. The man was an ex-officer, tall and broad-shouldered, cheerful and self-assured; his wife was also large and friendly.

Near midnight we were told we were leaving. Group by group, trying to make as little noise as possible, we left the apartment and stepped into the creaking snow. Around the corner waited two high army Studebaker trucks, equipped with benches along the sides and down the middle. I was seated at the front on the left, as was the couple I was registered with. We put our bundles at our feet under the bench, and I hung a basket of clothes on a bracket above my head.

The excitement of entering and roll call ended, orders were given to keep completely silent, and the truck set out. It went in and out of several side streets, perhaps to meet up with other vehicles in the convoy, and we left the city.

This was an attempt to leave on a larger scale than before—four trucks were leaving at once. The objective was to reach the town of Grodno near the Polish border, about one hundred and fifty kilometers away. Apparently, conditions were expected to be right that night for crossing the border. Someone with experience had reckoned that in five or six hours we would reach the border, and if all went well, we might even make it there in time for the morning train to Bialystok on the Polish side.

Only a few minutes passed before the truck put on the brakes and slowed down. We heard voices outside. Someone stuck out his head and informed the rest of us that military guards were stopping us. While in the process of slowing down, our truck suddenly spurted forward and swerved sharply from one side to another, as if it was going around an obstacle placed in its path. We heard loud shouts in Russian, followed immediately by a volley of fire. The shots came from the right and behind, and sounded to me like the pounding of hail or gravel on the metal side walls. The truck did not stop, however, but continued to barrel along with a sharp turn to the left, descending to a gravel road. Several seconds of silence followed before we broke into commotion. Everyone burst out with questions—what happened? Were those shots? Were they aiming at us?

Among them was the voice of a woman saying, with impressive self-control: "Well, I'm wounded. They hit my hand. Does someone have dressing or a handkerchief?" They were still trying to help her when the woman beside me cried hysterically: "Woe for us, they've caught us, we're doomed, what will become of us?" Others and I tried to calm her, to shut her up, but she continued wailing.

All at once one of the two girls opposite me cried out, "Oh no, I feel blood on my arm, what is it, what happened? Light a match!" And already she was crying bitterly, "Dvoireleh, Dvoireleh, my dear friend Dvoireleh."

And as for me, most of the time I had my eyes closed shut as tight as I could, as in those days before with the old regimen of prayers once more on my lips,

praying again this time, that on this night, too, I would be saved unharmed from danger. I held my breath and covered my ears.

Oy vey, they were saying, they've killed Dvorah Bod. A blonde, cheerful, twenty-year-old from Shavli, who sat in the row opposite me with her friends; it was apparently she who lay there with blood streaming from her temple.

Now there was great commotion and panic. The truck continued to speed along the bumpy dirt road. Through the flapping tarpaulin we began to discern small headlights far behind us. The sky was dark, snow gleamed all around, and the lights grew closer and closer, resolving into pairs like predatory eyes. Once more the truck swerved with a sharp turn, entering a forest. For a moment this was a relief—we could no longer see the pursuing lights and I felt better, as if I had covered my head with my blanket after a bad dream. After going a short distance, the vehicle stopped, and out of it jumped a man who broke into shouts in Polish that I couldn't understand, "Spread out! Hide!". Someone translated, and immediately we jumped out and dropped down as if bitten by snakes. Groups formed, and panicked consultations started up—where are we, what do we do now, they'll be after us soon. I found myself near the couple I had been assigned to—from their reactions and behavior, they gave the impression of being reasonable people that could be relied on in an emergency.

After everyone had jumped out of the truck, no one dared to venture far from the place where we were. The man whispered to his wife—I know this area, I worked here once. There should be some structures here, we should go hide in them. I asked if I could come and they agreed.

While confusion reigned and people were still arguing, each one throwing out his own suggestion, I made a bold decision—to climb back up in the truck and retrieve my suitcase. I was supremely conscious of the fact that this was my only chance to try to regain my few most precious belongings before it was too late.

There was no sense in my action—the Russians, though still out of sight, were getting closer, and our people were likely to scatter to the four winds at any instant. It was an instantaneous decision, the kind my mother would have been proud of.

While I was climbing up—the tailgate was down and this helped me boost myself—I heard strange noises. From the depths of the truck came a series of low sounds that stopped and started. At first I didn't know what they meant—was someone still sleeping in the vehicle? I felt a chill on my skin—these were the sounds of a death rattle, the like of which I had first heard a year before, during Alik's mother's last hours. For a few seconds I was glued to the spot. Instinctively I wanted to retreat quickly, to get completely away. In spite of this I decided to advance as far as I could. The noises were on the right, while I had to look for my suitcase on the left. Cautiously groping forward, with my eyes tightly shut and my jaws clenched, I reached my suitcase. I did not bother with the basket of clothes hanging somewhere above me, but rather turned around fast to crawl back out, trying as quickly as I could to cut myself off from the continuous wave of sounds that came without stopping from the dying Dvorah Bod.

By the time I jumped back down people had begun to disperse. I managed to rejoin the couple, who were already leaving the spot. The vehicle remained on the road, with the girl who had been shot inside it. Among all those people not a single soul stayed near her. And even though, under those circumstances, it was every man for himself, among the bundle of traumas from that night, there remains within me perplexity, shame, and a feeling of inadequacy because I climbed into an abandoned truck where a dying girl lay, just to rescue a little suitcase, a suitcase whose fate—in the end—was already sealed.

In the meantime, the three of us walked toward the northeast, trudging through deep snow up a slope in a thin forest interspersed with many bare outcrops. The others went westward. The man repeated insistently that he was familiar with the area; he had been here as a surveyor or engineer under the Germans. As we walked, we came across an abandoned brick building. While we hid among blocks of wood, or perhaps it was later, I became aware of another macabre fact in this delirious night—the forest we hid in was no other than the Ponar Forest, the infamous vale of death, the equivalent of the Ninth Fort for the Jews of Vilno and its surroundings.

Later, too, the odd question occurred to me, what exactly did the man survey for the Germans? But at the time, huddled and shaking with cold, buried in the

depths of a storeroom, we only prayed that the rest of the night would pass without mishap and that, with the first light, we could return safely to the city. In shock, I tried to digest the quick change, how in a few minutes the tables had been turned, and a quiet journey that was to end by catching the morning train to Bialystok had returned me all at once to a weary escape in snowcovered fields and forests, to burrowing—yet again—among boards and broken bricks.

And what is more—I keep arguing with myself— it was not now the Germans pursuing us, nor were we in danger of being led to a death pit when we were found. Why was it, then, that I should be seized by so great a panic?

What was the point of hiding, of freezing for several precious hours? Others, luckier or possessed of more sense than we, got away, taking a different direction. They reached a hamlet, knocked on a door or two, offered a considerable price for a horse and sleigh, and already in the last watch of that very night were back in their old houses in the not-too-distant city. And I even wondered if it wouldn't have been possible to hang onto the cars of the train whose whistles we heard once or twice in the area, using this means to get quickly away.

But the reality was different. Several hours of waiting in hiding began, hours of hearing our pursuers accompanied by barking dogs. It was only a matter of time before they would reach us. So the man decided there was no more point in hiding; we were better off going out and heading for the forest; perhaps we would succeed.

As it turned out, the convoy leader had been in our vehicle, and it was he who had made the decision to break through the barrier so we wouldn't get caught. In all likelihood his gamble paid off, at least for him personally, although he endangered the lives of the passengers in all of the trucks. After the fact, rumor had it that someone had informed on us or had arranged to turn us in. Some even pointed fingers at a certain Jewish driver who, although he was arrested, was released after a day of investigation and was held no further.

It was already nearly dawn when we started walking. Our path was a tentative one, although the man stated repeatedly that he knew the place, a few steps more and he would start to get his bearings. The route we chose seemed to go further south, but later it curved around and brought us against our

intention in the direction of the transport vehicle that we had abandoned. Far off we discerned headlights circling the area, and we froze in our tracks. The lights approached the place where our truck was—we recognized it—stopped for a moment or two, turned in the direction it had come, and drove away. Our man deduced from this that the pursuers had finished their searches and had left the area. We could now take advantage of the open path, which was the shortest route, and return to the city.

And there, near the truck, where two small gulches came together with a junction of roads and pathways, soldiers stood waiting for us. Stop, hands up, a search for weapons (they didn't touch me), a demand for identifying documents, there was no point trying to get away.

Earlier, in the shelter, the man had destroyed our false papers. He had stuffed the little pieces into cracks and between blocks of wood. I had also hidden the few zloty bills that Geffen had given me. During this act, the couple had whispered back and forth, exchanging worries and fears about what lay before them. It was probably their last conversation for many years.

The guard unit that caught us consisted of four or five quiet, business-like soldiers. The couple tried protesting the arrest, claiming that we were in a hurry to catch the morning train to the city, but we were simply ordered to stand aside and that was that. It was clear we had erred by returning to the intersection. Meanwhile a man came by, a Russian this time, on his pre-dawn way to work. He too was stopped and not allowed to go on. The man protested, claiming that he worked in the bakery and had to arrive on time. At that moment I had a childish idea. I turned to a soldier and told him, in my broken Russian, that I too was hurrying to work in Vilno. I was a Jewish boy who lived in a nearby village with a local person who had saved me from the Germans, and I worked as a barber's apprentice in the city. Who gets a haircut on Sunday, the soldier asked directly. An officer will be here soon and you can tell him that.

I was a small, trapped animal trying by any means to get away. What the couple thought of me when I suddenly changed my stripes, I don't know. I am sure they looked forgivingly on my childlike efforts to save my skin, and very probably they took little notice of my actions—their hearts were heavy enough before the looming uncertainty.

Soldiers' voices and dogs' barking came from the direction of our hiding place—one of the guard units must have discovered our tracks. Before long they did indeed turn back, descending in our direction, and joined the soldiers around us. The search party came to an end—a truck arrived and collected all the military people and us, and took us away. Before this happened, I believe I tried once more to tell the story that I had concocted to a more senior person, but nothing came of it. They took the Russian baker with them, too, but they let him off at the entrance to the city. They spoke animatedly and with soldierly gaiety, grumbling about the Jews who had got them out of their beds on a Saturday night. A blonde Katyusha, the focus of mirthful attention, spoke proudly of how she had fired a machine gun.

In the city, a fresh white morning had already begun. People dressed in their best were walking the streets, going to church; horns honked, and we were being led here beside them, hunted, bound for a different destination entirely. I am surprised that I remember the soldiers' talk, the appearance of the city, the stops—because the moment I sat down, on an overturned bucket, I became exceedingly tired. I fell into a troubled sleep, broken here and there by loud noises and sharp turns. When I woke up in spite of myself, we were already entering, through a side door, a large building in the city center. They took us inside and directed us, I seem to remember, into a kitchen or dining room to drink something.

Long hallways, high ceilings, benches for waiting, and doors with high frames—the look of an ordinary office building. No guards or soldiers were to be seen, but I understood that we were in a command post of the NKGB; we were seated in the hall to wait for the registration going on behind closed doors. It was somewhat reassuring that a large number of our people were present in the place. We met the people of our other trucks, mostly women and babies, whose interrogations were just ending. Sometimes they were moved from one room to another; their faces were gloomy and their children were crying. There were no men—they had apparently been taken elsewhere. The hours passed with much tedium and prolonged waiting. Now and then doors opened, our people came out, were taken away, brought back to wait; it was impossible to get a clear idea of what was happening within. I had the feeling the process was proceeding slowly because it was Sunday—certainly

a naive thought to have about a security police command post. And although the detainees seemed wretched and their gaze was blank, there was nothing in this to instill excessive fear. Here and there someone let slip a word to his neighbor—they take everything away, they ask endless questions. I occupied myself with the question of what I would say to them and how I would save my suitcase.

It occurred to me that the album of seals might possibly be the thing that would cause problems, since none of my other possessions were controversial. I considered leaving it in the hall under the bench until I returned from the interrogation. But its colorful cover stood out too much and I had nothing to put over it that wouldn't draw attention. Because we were allowed freely to go to the bathroom, I took it with me there under my clothes. The barred—and locked—windowsill was too high and narrow for me to put the suitcase there, so I set the album on top of the elevated water tank. I made sure it wouldn't fall when the flush chain was pulled, and returned contented to the waiting area, intending to return when the interrogation was over and take the album back.

While I waited, the couple from the night before went by me. Silently we exchanged comprehending glances. I could not say more to them under the present circumstances.

Hours passed, my turn was coming, and I noticed that only a few of those sent in came back out to our hall. What would happen to the album if they turned me out somewhere else? I hesitated. With a heavy heart I returned to the bathroom and took the album down. From this point I held the case in my hands without knowing how I would save it.

My turn came, one of the last. I was brought into a room with three U-shaped tables and was made to sit in the middle. On one of the tables stood a stack of filled out forms, along with a collection of earrings, gold chains, diamond rings, dollars, sterling pounds, and even gold Napoleons. When I was made to sit down there were two investigators in the room—one asked questions and took notes while the other checked possessions and clothes. I set the album down casually at my side, where it lay unnoticed throughout the interrogation. With a certain courtesy they asked me the details of my identity, where I came

from, and where I was headed. I answered what I answered and they wrote it down.

Up to that point things had happened with a breezy directness. They were obviously not paying too much attention to me, a mere child. But in the meantime the other man had finished rummaging through my case and had moved on to my outer clothing. With little trouble he undid the seams in my coat—even though they had been reinforced since my first attempt to leave—and began pulling from the depths, one after another, the various documents. “What are these?” they asked, their faces growing sober. I demonstrated the innocent nature of the documents, told them I had found out that Father had survived and was in Poland. Some good people had agreed to take me to him and these were his papers from before the war that had been saved with me. But their expression remained severe. I wondered whether this was a professional expression put on to undermine a subject’s self-confidence, or whether I was up against people with limited understanding whose brains, since we were dealing with old documents, simply did not register my explanation.

I became much more suspect to them that when they found, deep inside the coat, right next to the tear in my pocket, my winter cap, which I had been looking for in vain for two days, they were completely unimpressed by my surprise and joy, nor did they rest until they had mercilessly cut the cap into bits and pieces.

In an effort to satisfy them, I appealed to one of our people, a boy who knew Russian. I tried to explain to the investigators the background of my parents’ certificates. I told them again about my father, a teacher and researcher who had completed his thesis about the Spanish Inquisition with honors, of my mother the nurse, poet, communist and partisan, who had graduated from a rural gymnasium in the twenties; I even told them about the washtub, how the documents had been miraculously preserved and how much it meant to me that I take them with me. They looked at me with glassy eyes, kept silent, and took notes.

The interrogation ended. I got up to go and put my hand out to pick up my cap and the album beside it. “Just a minute, what do you have there?...” For years afterward I imagined to myself a different ending to the affair, one in which the

investigators never noticed me leave the room with the stamp album in my hand. But it happened otherwise. The interrogation resumed.

At first there were two of them, one Russian, the other Lithuanian. Later, it seems to me, a Yiddish speaker joined them and they all descended upon me again at once—what are these strange marks pasted into a bound notebook; who gave them to you and to whom are you supposed to take them? In a conciliatory tone, with the voice of an indulgent teacher, I tried to unfold the story of my stamps, repeating again in my halting Russian the meaning of the collection and its historical importance, how I had collected them one by one. And with cynical contempt, they asked me again and yet again, and in spite of my answers, not only did I fail to satisfy them but their voices rose, and they hinted, with hidden menace—“we will get to the bottom of this!” And indeed I was trapped in a land where a document stamp was among the most sacred of things, demanding the fullest consideration. I began to see not only that the album had no chance of being left in my hands, but that I was in much greater trouble than I thought. Tears of anger and frustration welled up in my eyes—I was doing my best, trying to tell them the whole truth, and they were not listening at all. If only they would pass me up to a senior and wiser investigator, who would certainly understand my explanations.

At one point, one of the investigators suddenly took a new tack—so you wanted to go to Palestine, huh? “Of course not,” I said innocently, I was headed for Father in Katovitz—the name of the place I had heard mentioned during the last few days. When he repeated his accusation, I went so far as to wisecrack—“Why Palestine? They’re always shooting at you there.”

Whether I managed to anger them with my impudent reply or with my knowledge of international events, there is no doubt that the man across from me grew angry—to the point that he laid hands on me, as I came to tell it later. Some weeks before I had read in the paper—or it may have been on the news marquee hanging at the head of the city’s main boulevard, where I had once seen the photographs of world leaders meeting at the Potsdam and Yalta summits. This is also how I learned about the bombing of Hiroshima. And it was there where I read, and had not forgotten: “TASS Tel Aviv. Exchanges of fire were heard all night between the British army and members of the Jewish underground.” For years I connected this announcement to

"Wingate Night", when a ship of illegal immigrants named after Charles Orde Wingate docked along the coast of Tel Aviv and Bracha Fuld was killed. But in fact Wingate Night happened in March, 1946, while I read the announcement during the last months of 1945. I have yet to look into this.

They finally let up on me for a while and sent me into the kitchen for something to eat and drink. Then I was taken to a different floor, to a senior investigator, an officer. Once more came the volley of questions and answers that didn't register, with new questions added—who sent you, where did you leave from, who organized the trip?? I was relieved to realize that they weren't asking a thing about the children's home. As for the organizer, I made a character up, a man with a black beard who led us into a dark street and into the truck. This time, too, I made use of the boy who spoke Russian, which was convenient for me, since, in the course of translation, I could embellish and correct inconsistent answers. Gravely, the man wrote everything according to protocol and ordered me to sign. The interrogation was over. The album, of course, stayed with them.

My little suitcase, a leading player in this episode of my story - all my efforts to save it were in vain. Even crawling into the deserted truck was fruitless. And that is how, in the end, when I finally left that country, I was stripped of every material souvenir of my home and family - not the family photographs that I so miraculously discovered in the burned ghetto, not the documents in the washtub that Mother had gone to the trouble of burying, and not even the album of ghetto stamps that had survived so many pitfalls with me. What the Germans had not burned the Russians confiscated; nothing remained.

And the day was not yet over. All the children in the convoy were brought into the workers' club—so it appeared to me from the curtains, the chairs, and the slogans on the walls—and were given something to eat and drink. Dozens of children of different ages, some alone, others brothers and sisters, all of them younger than I. There was much weeping—they were the real victims of the affair, having been separated from their parents, who were likely to be sent to prison for a long time. An elderly man circulated among them, apparently one of the investigators, and tried to calm the crying children. And I, seized by arrogance, hatched a wicked plot: I began mocking the crying children, twisting my face in a caricature of their expressions, showing my clownish

faces to the Russian overseers stationed about. I was an old hand at being an orphan, displaying my advantage over the freshly hurt—bad behavior that reminds me of another act of wickedness, when I made jeering sounds over the wall at Maya once, in the house on Green Hill.

Nor was the day over even then. Evening fell and we were told we would be moved temporarily to the local Jewish children's home until the investigations were over. And although it was only a rumor, I did hear that we would very likely be sent to a "juvenile delinquent camp" near Minsk. Sad and downcast, we were brought in a closed jeep, taking several trips, to the children's home for supper.

I was tired and depleted. The orphanage had several children who had been transferred from ours and I was ashamed to have them see me in my disgrace. I was also fearful of Solomina's long arm, lest she come immediately and take me—and then what would I do?

The wait for dinner grew long—they were not prepared to take in dozens of children so suddenly—and we were famished. The director of the Lithuanian children's home moved among us, trying to reassure us, saying a comforting word, promising we would all have a place to sleep. I decided to take advantage of the chaos. I discovered a back door that could be opened, escaped through it to a neglected back yard and from there into the street. And although I had never been in that northern region of the city, I got my bearings and made it to the center, where I could find my way. Where to? Why, straight to the house of Liuba, Yaffa Braun, and Geffen.

When I came in, they looked as if a ghost had burst into their house. Liuba lay in her bed with a cold, and Yaffa Braun's mother was applying cupping glasses to her back. When Liuba saw me she jumped up as if stung, and the cups started dropping from her like beads from a broken chain. Knowledge of the previous night's failure had of course already spread all over the city. She began interrogating me forcibly: Did you give anything away? Did you tell them the address of your starting place? Crushed, I swore that I had kept my promise and was careful not to say anything. But I felt as if a cloud of anxiety was still hovering around me—perhaps they had freed me on purpose, so they could dog my footsteps, or—even worse—had persuaded me to become their accomplice. If not, how could a child who had never before been in the

area find his way back? And it was indeed a grave error on my part to return to the flat I had left, especially with Geffen living there, the chief organizer of the escape. But where else could I have gone when I knew no one here? To a certain extent I was aware of the problem—I had made my way back slowly, partly out of fatigue and dullness of senses, but also so as to give the impression of an innocent passerby, all the while throwing an occasional backward glance, as in a spy movie, to be sure no one was following me.

Yaffa Braun put an end to the many questions and took me under her care. She prepared a large and tasty meal for me, that I finished off as if my stomach were a bottomless pit, and in a reassuring tone she offered me a bed in some out-of-the-way corner, perhaps in another apartment or the adjoining, half-destroyed building. Tomorrow they would decide what to do with me. And I considered whether to return the next day to the children's home, since they had promised us that they would return our possessions.

Late the next morning, after a troubled sleep, I found Geffen beside my bed. Cautiously he repeated his questions about my story and the interrogation. He recommended that I not return—I had no chance of being given back my possessions. Until the storm passed I would have to hide somewhere, and he would see what he could do about that. Geffen himself went to live at a new address. The night before he had already destroyed the photographs I had left with him.

At The Goldbergs

It was clear I could not stay in the apartment where I was. Once more I took a clandestine journey across the entire city, a child following an adult, trailing along some distance from him, looking about for possible dangers. The Goldberg home: Hasia and Yasha, their little girl Oka and a grandmother—a warm Jewish family. Later they told me how I came to be with them. Yasha was a Zionist from way back, active in the Beitar Youth movement. During the war they had escaped to the Soviet Union, where he served in the Red Army. After the victory, the family was reunited and returned here, hoping to continue their escape westward. One day Geffen called Yasha and asked urgently for his help in hiding a boy. Hasia added that they had hesitated quite a bit, but when she heard my family name, she wondered if I wasn't a relative of her former classmate, a serious and diligent student at the Teachers Seminary of Telzh—none other than my Aunt Sheina-Haya, and this connection helped tip the balance in my favor.

A chimney stove was lit in the center of the flat and the family crowded around it. Although Yasha had a senior position in a government general store, food was scarce, and I was more than once embarrassed at being another mouth to feed from their limited store.

During the first days there I was still in shock. Yet to a certain extent I wasn't too surprised—some part of me was always ready in advance for every catastrophe that might occur. Rumors had it that I had been asked after in the city—Solomina was evidently already looking for me. So I returned to my old habits from the days of the Lithuanian woman a year and a half ago—moving about the flat without shoes, and when someone came in, hiding in a closet and staying there until the guests left. The five-year-old Oka was sworn not to mention my existence to either man or child. Because these were cold winter days when no one played in the yard anyway, it wasn't difficult.

I was trapped once more, at the mercy of strangers, suspended next to the full lives of others, as if I was observing them from the darkness and the frost outside, through the lit windows of a warm house.

The house was on Rudininku Street, in the area of the former Jewish ghetto of two or three years ago, an area that had evidently been evacuated without fire

and smoke. It was odd seeing a ghetto left standing. On the walls of the houses, in halls and passages, the graffiti of the former inhabitants could still be seen: "We do not wish to die," "We are dying of hunger", "Revenge, Jews". A day or two after I came to them a new refugee from the convoy joined me—a bearded yeshiva student. He was apparently the convoy's treasurer, or had some other principal role. The police had pursued him relentlessly, and the good-hearted Yasha had agreed to hide him, too. The man was tight-lipped, withdrawn, or perhaps just very prudent—he exchanged few words with us. I do not even know whether he was truly religious or merely pretending to be. Years later, Hasia told me that she noticed that the man, in spite of being among a family that shared all of its meager food with guests, had not hesitated in the least at stepping out and buying excellent sausage and other good products for himself alone.

For about a week he stayed in the flat with us—and I believe it was a dangerous error to have us both in the same place—before he decided to move on. One more small story from Hasia: Yasha, who accompanied him to the train, lent him his large, warm overcoat as camouflage. As soon as they reached the station the man jumped into the departing train without saying a word, disappearing with the coat. They never heard from him again.

What does one do all day in captivity? I read the few books that were in the house, flipped through the newspaper from front to back, and kept myself busy with small worries. What happened to the second play at the children's home party without me? The thought of having to go back to my city and the Lithuanian school bothered me, for I had not finished the homework we were given over Christmas break. Haimke Katz from the children's home told me that when I left, a fight broke out among the children over who would sleep on the large pillow I left behind.

In the evening by the stove. Hasia would sing in her soft, velvety voice. She loved mostly folk songs and remembered many.

Third Voyage – To Poland – February

With the Ciocia

The three weeks I spent in hiding at the Goldbergs were depressing. I returned with full force to old emergency habits and was gloomy with despair. What chance did I have of getting out of this dead-end situation?

But one day Yasha came home from work with news—a woman had arrived from Poland who was willing to take me back with her. At this stage of my life I was already no small skeptic; I was careful not to get carried away with enthusiasm. At the same time I was so desperate that any change seemed better to me than prolonged, futile hiding. Let them take me wherever they would, so long as I got out of here.

A day or two later, I went to meet her, clandestinely, through the market booths in the old city of Vilno. The Goldbergs made me swear not to tell her my story, what a “hot item” I was, lest she be put off and withdraw her offer. Before me stood an elderly woman with dyed blond hair, and a round, pleasant, if worried face that had clearly once been well cared for and beautiful. We talked a little, and I understood that she had papers that would enable her to have me join her. Moreover, I felt she had a special interest in taking me, because she checked and verified my identity. When we parted, she said that, after she finished her business, which could be within a few days, I must be ready for the journey.

Several days of anxious waiting passed, and then came the hoped-for signal. While parting from the family, I promised that, as soon as I reached Palestine I would send them a crate of oranges. For years that promise bothered me, without my finding the strength to fulfill it. Fifteen years went by before I heard the surprising news that the Goldbergs had come to Israel. Miriam and I went to visit them, taking with us a crate of oranges. They all knew immediately what I meant by it. What is more—it appeared that the Goldberg family had turned the oranges into a legend. When the two girls in the family quarreled, Oka, the elder, would threaten her little sister Sally, who had been born in the meantime—“Be that way and I won’t give you any of the oranges Sholemke sends us from Palestine.”

The Goldberg family parted from me with warmth. They wrapped me in a big scarf and warned me not to talk with anyone on the way, lest they recognize my features or voice. Once more a cautious journey on foot through the city, once more the suspension of breath at the train station. Inspections, inspections. Buying the tickets, entering the cars, moving from car to car. How was I to get through it all? I felt as I did before crossing the river. But, in spite of the somewhat weak appearance that made her look, as if she didn't quite know what to do, the woman completed all the arrangements without a mishap, and after making our way through the maze we found ourselves in a sleeping car on the train.

To this day it is not entirely clear to me how the connection with this woman was formed, who directed her toward me, and how. She had come to Vilno with the express purpose of retrieving her grandson and bringing him to Poland, but in her papers two grandsons were already registered. I later learned that it was a pre-arranged business. When she had come to Warsaw to put her travel documents in order, she had been given to understand it would be worth her while to bring back with her a certain other child as well.

The last moments before the train started; anxieties rose and overwhelmed me. Move already, move. As in Rotushe Square, waiting for the truck; as in the futile wait at the train station in Kovno, the minutes turned into hundreds of separate split seconds. Finally the car wheels began turning, at first with worrisome slowness (perhaps we would stop and go back to the station), but gradually with increasing power. Ah, the noise of clanking cars! How I love the sound.

The first part of our journey was eastward to Minsk—only half a day's journey. From there we would continue to the border town of Brest-Litovsk, and finally take another train on the Moscow-Berlin line, which would bring us to Warsaw, our final destination on this journey. Three legs of the journey, each one evidently no more than a few hours in all.

In the train compartment I got to know my travel companions for the first time, Ciocia ("aunt" in Polish) Frieda Gorfinkel and Yolik, her eight-year-old grandson. For about a week we three were like a tightly knit and intimate family unit. When getting on the train we scouted for good spots to sit and sleep, and at stops we looked together for hot water. During longer breaks we

went out looking for heated waiting rooms, fresh food, and above all milk for Yolik. For Yolik was the apple of his grandmother's eye, although to me he seemed capricious and stubborn, with all the mannerisms of a spoiled child. I envied him for having a grandmother all his own. It angered me that he had no self-discipline, that he gave full expression to his whims.

At first she seemed to be a delicate and fragile person. But in fact, Ciocia accomplished her mission with determination and courage, carrying it off under the guise of a helpless figure when necessary. She had valid passports, good money and, in addition—so I felt—she drew upon an inner source of strength. Perhaps it was because of the familial circumstances of our journey, or the arrangements made to bring me. To me, she was a rescuing angel who perhaps was not at all aware of the importance of her mission. I felt guilty for exploiting her innocence and endangering her without her knowledge.

During the journey I discovered that I was not the only one traveling under a borrowed identity. While making a cautious trip to the dining car or the restroom, I met familiar faces several times—two other children from the four ill-fated four truck convoy happened to be on the very same train. One of them was the girl, as I was later told, under whose initiative the small children were smuggled out, the day after our arrest. The other was a young boy dressed as a religious girl, clothed in a long-sleeved dress and a kerchief on a shaved head. We exchanged glances without saying a word.

We arrived in Minsk late at night. The freezing cold of late January and a ghost town weighed down by its ruins. We had to wait there for several hours for the early morning train from Moscow. We gathered in a partly heated room designated for mothers with little children, but nearly froze anyway.

That night of waiting may have been what induced in each of us, about a day later, a nasty cold, high temperature, and a sore throat.

The first train into Minsk was full of soldiers on leave. The following trains, heading west, were crammed with the families of Russian military personnel going to join their loved ones stationed in occupied German provinces. They were distinguishable by their many belongings and the satisfied look on their faces. In addition, there were Polish people undergoing “repatriation”—according to the agreement, returning to their old homeland, together with Jews, who, although ostensibly with similar rights, were in fact searching for

cracks to slide through from country to country on their endless wandering journey.

Brest-Litovsk was the hometown of many of my father's family, not one of whom survived. Although signs of destruction were not lacking, there was a large and spacious train station serving those who were leaving the Soviet Union. Dozens of people sat on their baggage in different corners of the station, waiting their turn. Even if one had all the required documents for crossing the border, getting tickets to Warsaw was as hard as parting the Red Sea. We sat down in a corner somewhere and the Ciocia began running back and forth between offices and ticket windows. At first she returned totally disappointed—no one could promise her tickets within the next week. As her cold grew worse, so did her despair. But a few bank notes passing from hand to hand had their effect and, in the end, she returned content from one of her forays—she was promised tickets within a day or two.

The worse the grandmother's flu became, the more tasks and responsibilities I took on. I looked for hot water, scouted about for fresh food; sometimes I ran to hold a place in line at one of the hopeful-looking windows. As she grew weaker, and perhaps also gained confidence in me, she began sharing her worries with me. A sort of certain closeness grew between us. We were like two adults giving each other mutual aid, and I was proud of it.

Finally, at midnight one night, we got on the renowned Moscow-Berlin train, which moved quickly out of its berth. One more inspection of Soviet passports, and another immediately after by officers wearing unfamiliar uniforms, sporting ridiculous four-cornered hats—and we were in Poland! You want to cheer, to break out shouting hooray! But hush. Always better to be careful, for the train is full of Russians. The engine picks up speed, dark evergreen forests hug the shuddering rails, my riverboat chugs forward, and I am in a stupor with a high fever and a sore throat. Flush against the cold windowpane I try to measure with my gaze the forests speeding toward me. Here, although I am burning with fever, the Erl King will not overtake me.

With Weisstein

The train sped forward, without stopping at the smaller stations, and after a continuous journey by night and day, approached the outskirts of Warsaw.

Here, by contrast we were forced into a long and nerve-wracking delay in the Praha suburb on the far side of the Visla. Ruin was everywhere, the result of prolonged battles at the gates of the city, similar to the sights we saw in Minsk several days earlier. So it would be in the coming days throughout all of Poland, and Germany as well—a long journey through ruins.

Only here, during our unsettling wait at the end of the journey, did I dare tell Ciocia some of my adventures of the last month. I felt the need to share this information with her as a measure of the gratitude I felt toward her.

At dark we stepped down, drained and weary, on the Warsaw platform, and I was like a dreamer, like a drunk, unable to believe I had really crossed this river as well. Perhaps my mother would be waiting here, and I would run toward her and be gathered into her arms. Here, too, my story was supposed to end.

The train station was noisy. Among the arrivals milled poorly dressed people insistently offering “notz i kolatzia” (bed and breakfast). I was amazed that the Ciocia didn’t lose her bearings in the busy station; she found her way, carried baggage, and finally, after haggling, showed the sleigh driver how to find a certain address in a street with a familiar ring to it, Yeruzalimska. In a flat full of beds, people lay sleeping in various corners, each one covered by his clothes and his belongings beside him. A pleasant-faced woman greeted us, offered a hot drink, and showed us a corner with a bed already made up. Immediately I fell into a deep sleep, as peaceful as any I had known.

In the morning I saw a window overlooking an inner courtyard. There, beside a yellow wall, rested a laurel wreath entwined in black ribbon; above it, fastened to the wall, was a copper plate engraved with a name and date. “Shot by the Germans”. I had not yet gotten very far after all.

After a wonderful breakfast (rolls, butter, a soft-boiled egg), we went to meet Weisstein. I parted quickly from the Ciocia and came under his wing.

My journey with the Ciocia was over. It had lasted, as it happened, a total of five days—from Monday to Friday. The significance of the journey for me was out of all proportion to its actual length.

Weisstein was short, somewhat dwarfish, in his forties. Full face, high forehead, deeply receding hair above his temples, and wise Jewish eyes that reminded me of Uncle Shmuel Siderer, whose home my mother and I had

gone to visit early one morning. He had a reserved smile that guarded a secret, a pleasant expression in which was mixed a measure of courtesy, tolerance, and kind-hearted generosity. I never saw him get angry or frown. He remains in my memory as Dr. Weisstein, although my father says he was no doctor at all. He struck me as a well-educated man, albeit a very practical one. In the ensuing years I felt the urge to contact him more than once, but without success. He took me with him wherever he went, received me with cordiality and respect, without being patronizing or lording it over me, and bore with patience and self-restraint my expressions of independence and silence.

I do not know what he was doing in Poland, but he traveled frequently between Warsaw and Lodz, taking me with him. I never learned who gave him the job of transferring me and who paid him for it. I marveled also how he came to know so quickly that I was stuck in Vilno after the truck incident, causing him to have Ciocia sent for me. I also have no clear answer concerning the identity of the first messenger, the one I was to leave Vilno with, nor whether Weisstein or someone else had sent him. And what about Kagan, how did he fit into the picture? Once in Lodz with Weisstein, in a Jewish neighborhood, we happened to meet the first messenger. The two exchanged a few sharp words, and then the man turned to me, wonderingly—where did you disappear to, why didn't you come to the station, where I was waiting for you? And where have you been until now, Weisstein asked him. In another chance meeting, perhaps by then in Germany, the man urged me to verify that it was he who had brought about my escape. I avoided siding with either one. I got the impression that the man was trying to cash in on a transaction that he had not been able to complete.

Weisstein, in any case, was a decent, honest man, a good uncle. I was much in need of such an uncle. He accorded me friendly protection along with a good deal of personal freedom. I went out every chance I got. For me wandering freely was the highest expression of my happy, intoxicating feeling. The gloom and tension of the past few months were gone, and my long process of liberation, begun a year and a half earlier, was over. I was free!

I went into the street—there were taxis, private cars, and streetcars. Stores seemed to me full of tasty goods, and the many movie theaters were

decorated with colorful posters and intriguing photographs, a new fascinating world, different from the one I had left behind. Despite the scenes of destruction, the many refugees, and the oppressive desolation, people here had a different look to them. I was a child, but I felt the prevailing air of freedom everywhere. Stacks of morning and evening newspapers with huge headlines, colorful and loud were on every corner. These were days of preparation for the first democratic elections in Poland after the war (as well as the last for many years). Flyers from an array of parties with pictures of popular leaders filled the walls, and the street looked like a festive, colorful play.

And there was Jewish life. Agencies of various institutions, factions, and parties from the entire spectrum of the rainbow. Each of these had its gathering place, offices, training groups in attics and half-deserted buildings, and held political conferences where impassioned speeches were given about current issues. One could find newspapers printed in Yiddish here, or copied in imperfect Hebrew, and on the walls—announcements for plays in Yiddish and a concert with a famous singer. And all of these were out in the open, without a care. Here we could meet those of our people who had mysteriously disappeared earlier; here too we could find lines attached to distant continents.

Clandestine paths, spoken of openly, led from here to the coasts of the Mediterranean in the south and to survivor camps in the west.

We were in Warsaw two or three days, and from there we went to Weisstein's place in Lodz. I took walks through the city with an allowance in my pocket that seemed large. I enjoyed spending, blowing all the money. Movies, good food in outdoor stalls, and streetcar rides the length and breadth of the city, line after line, filled my day. The cars were crowded and many passengers hung on the outside. I quickly learned how to avoid the ticket collector by moving to the open railing at the back of the streetcar, which was also full to overflowing. Once I got stranded in an outlying suburb on the mistaken assumption that every streetcar immediately retraces its tracks. After a long walk I returned to the city, happy with the adventure.

I enjoyed the abundance of food one could buy in units of *deka*

—one hundred grams, and I thoroughly enjoyed the breakfasts Weisstein so cheerfully and generously made. There were fresh rolls, butter, sausage, boiled and fried eggs. One day I gathered the courage to ask something special of Weisstein—to make “gogl-mogl” for me. This was a kind of nectar Mother used to make for me, especially when I had a cold or was ill. Weisstein could barely conceal his astonishment to hear this strange request, but he recovered and agreed, merely asking me how he was to go about making it. To the best of my memory, Mother would mix a few eggs, sugar, and milk until the mixture became thick and light-colored. You could add cocoa to enhance the delight, and so we did. However—I forgot that you first had to separate the white from the yolk and use only the yolk. So in the end, although we beat the mixture vigorously, no gogl-mogl emerged from it, to my dismay. It just goes to show that not every childhood memory can be reconstructed.

A couple of special events happened to me in Lodz. The Anglo-American Commission had come to the city to study the problem of Jewish refugees in Europe and their connection to Palestine. The city’s Zionist institutions were seized with emotion. Posters were distributed and the entire populace was urged to demonstrate outside the hotel windows where the Commission stayed. From morning on, Jews streamed to the lot just across from the hotel. Many were there, among them Weisstein and I. Since Democrat Square—but what a difference—I had not seen such a massive Jewish gathering. There were speeches, they sang Hatikvah, and I was excited and moved. Once more I had a people, and I was flesh of its flesh.

That evening an assembly was called in the theater building. After the speeches came the artistic program, in which a world-famous ballet dancer appeared, doing De Falla’s Fire Dance. The dancer moved with the stormy rhythms against a backdrop of flaming, trembling screens made of strands of shining glass threads. With hypnotizing motions he emerged from beneath the fire, back and forth, passing through it, surviving unharmed, and I was mesmerized. It was the first artistic performance I had seen for many months, and my first encounter with ballet and modern Spanish music. It made a deep impression on me.

We went back once or twice to Warsaw. We were seeking suitable opportunities to continue on our way to Germany, and in the meantime Weisstein took care of our affairs. I gathered that he was in no hurry. We also had to decide which escape route to take—whether to go south through Czechoslovakia, Austria and into Bavaria, now under American rule, or to go west toward the conquered regions of Germany, which were in Russian and English hands. Meanwhile, I enjoyed our trips in Poland. I loved our easy wandering, the train routes, the unfolding panoramas, views of forests and landscapes, and the commotion of the big city, Warsaw.

We visited a number of kibbutz-in-training units, checking out the possibility of temporarily joining them for the next step of our journey, but nothing came of it. There was tension among the Jewish population—strong antisemitism was felt from all sides. And indeed, a few months later that same year there was a pogrom against the Jews of Kielce in the Katovitz province, the first large pogrom after the war. This antisemitism did not bother me, perhaps because I was used to it in my own native land, and also because I knew I would be leaving here soon. It was odd to hear of Jews who intended to renew their permanent lives in this place.

During all this time I was in the company of adults only. I was present in their political and commercial conversations; I was included in the cycles of rumors and circulating information. I met almost no children—there were only a few of them.

One day we went to visit the Ciocia at her home in Warsaw. We saw Yolik too, who now appeared calmer. At the time of our visit, two young Polish officers happened to be visiting, owners of angular caps crossed with stripes on the crest. These were Dodik, the Ciocia's nephew, and his friend Grisha. During the war these two boys had escaped to Russia, returning from there with the Polish forces. They were now about to be discharged and had already started engineering studies at the university. I did not know then that I would soon meet up with them again, and that Grisha would become a lifelong friend.

Forty years later, opposite the Ciocia's gravestone in the yellow sands of Holon, the circle closed. Here I met Yolik with his family; Dodik, now an engineer in Sweden; and the Ciocia's daughter, whose expression preserves

her mother's charm. We told one another our different stories, and to my astonishment all the heroes of this chapter of my memories stood before me, one next to the other, like actors taking a bow in front of a curtain at the end of a play.

Fourth Journey / To Berlin / March

On the Road

Some weeks after I came to Poland, Weisstein finished making his arrangements; he had found a convoy suitable for crossing into Germany and we set out for Szczecin, a port city near the Baltic coast in the northwest part of the country.

We came to Szczecin through Poznan, a two-day train journey. On the way I could already tell, from their bundles and faces, those who were going to continue with us. Like us, they too were moving towards the collection point. When we reached the city, we all found ourselves in the same hotel-like structure, perhaps the only one operating in the half-abandoned city, and the commotion was great. We were ordered to keep our presence and our destinations secret, but these instructions were unrealistic. It was impossible to explain away the presence of so many Jewish families, all carrying bundles, on a certain day in the middle of winter, in an outlying, half-deserted city. I, who had been burned once before by a similar assembly, found myself shaking in trepidation at the sloppy disregard for secrecy on the part of the group members.

For two or three days we waited for trucks in the temporary hotel. These were supposed to take us by way of the Polish border and German territory to Berlin. It was said that the drivers were Russian soldiers returning to their bases in empty trucks, and that this was an everyday occurrence with no special risk. But stories were also told about acts of looting or extortion committed by drivers, who would stop their trucks on the way. Our route, also, would take us through German territory under Russian rule did nothing to warm our heart. I did not hide my fears from Weisstein, and he tried to reassure me—"Things like that don't happen here," he said confidently.

Already on the first morning in the hotel, I found the presence of the excited crowd tedious and annoying, as they shared their losses, troubles and fears in intimate detail with one another. I went roaming the city, which looked to me like a ghost town. It was February, heavy snow covered everything. Paths beaten on several streets wound through white walls, blending unrecognizably into clumps of ruins at their edges. Evidently only a few people lived here. I had never before seen such large areas of urban destruction.

I was attracted by the port, with its seemingly endless panorama. Bent-headed cranes aided me as landmarks, and among the many frozen jetties the prows of half-sunken ships jutted out at odd angles. Other than the riverboat wharves for riverboats in our city, I had not seen a port before, certainly not one this big. The silence and destruction stretching out on all sides impressed me. A year and more had passed since the war. , I do not know whether it was the result of mutual bomb attacks or a vengeful act of sabotage by the retreating Germans.

The next day I invited Yehudith, a girl from one of the families we had befriended, to join me in my walks. Even though she was younger than I, she came willingly. I felt I knew my way around well enough in the strange city, and felt no uncertainty about my wanderings. To impress her, I took her back to the giant port, which was like a slumbering giant. On our return, which apparently wasn't quite on time, we found her frightened and worried mother waiting for us at the hotel entrance.

As our wait dragged on, we were instructed to move from the hotel to an outlying suburb on the edge of the city, near a kibbutz training center, among half-deserted villas. There—we were told—we would continue to wait without attracting too much attention. But that is not what happened. We went there at nightfall in a wagon or car and soon lost our way in the white wasteland. We came across a police patrol, and it was they who pointed us in the right direction without asking unnecessary questions. The morning found us stretched out on the dirty floor of a deserted house, full of abandoned objects and broken pieces of furniture. The scattered books were all in German—among them volumes of the Brockhaus encyclopedia—testifying that these were the family quarters of German officers. Once more I was snooping

through the abandoned spoils of war. In a half-flooded basement I found some treasures—German stamps and envelopes from the days of the war. Among the rest, I found a 1938 pocket calendar from a German coal supply company, and in this I began, on that same day—for the first time—to write, with a dull pencil, dates, names and places. I even reconstructed the words of ghetto songs. It was my first attempt to look back. This booklet, in which I continued to inscribe important events during the coming months (in Berlin they were written with a different pencil, a sharper one) is with me even today, and it is my earliest written evidence that my memories are true, and not the figments of a wild imagination.

The trucks came during one of the following nights, two of them, I believe. We clambered aboard and settled ourselves among our bundles on the floor. Someone tried fastening the edge of the back canvas flap, but without success. From this point on, throughout the whole journey, those who sat in back were charged with holding the flap down to prevent our being seen from outside, especially when shafts of light from car headlights, checkpoints, or city lamps fell on our truck.

We drew close to the border and I became very tense. The course of events was so similar to the scenario I had already been through—it was hard to shake off the comparison.

Thank heaven for Grisha. Was it only by chance that I sat close to the tailgate, not deep within the truck? And by good luck, beside me, hunched over, was Grisha. He had plenty to be anxious about, being a deserter from the Polish army. But Grisha was a calm person by nature, self-possessed, at ease with himself and his surroundings, wise and enlightened, full of dry, cynical humor. He was also evidently sensitive enough to discern my anxiety. And so it was that he talked to me through the entire night, occasionally cracking jokes or making cynical remarks that gave the events a certain measure of proportion, and gave me something of a feeling of confidence, enabling me to control, to some extent, the fear that rose to choke me.

On the face of it, what was there to be afraid of? There was not a clear border with the Soviet Union; and yet we held our breath at every stop or delay. The voices of guards and investigators would be heard, after which the journey would continue. Which of these halts was at the former border and

which were merely checkpoints, I could not tell. In any case, my eyes were shut. Once the guard even came around to the back of the truck and shone his flashlight on the swaying canvas. We lay flat and held our breath. But even this check passed without incident. Who knows—it may even have been a staged inspection, conducted to increase the payments that found their way into the driver's hands toward the end of the journey.

I am grateful to Grisha. Thanks to him, I was not alone that night. Since then, I adopted him as my elder brother, accompanying him loyally at every station in his life, and for all his cynicism, I cannot forget the tears that welled up in his eyes during my fiftieth birthday celebration. Even he, this wise man, had siblings once, a family.

The long night neared its end. I dozed off a little between one stop and another, each time fearful of mishaps. The further we proceeded, the fewer stops we made, the motor humming solidly and surely. A certain calm joined my great weariness, and in the end, my senses dulled, I settled into a troubled sleep. And suddenly there was bright light—the morning of a new day, in one of Berlin's suburbs within Soviet occupied/ territory. The truck stopped in a small village square, and we were told to scatter quickly. From here we could proceed, using municipal transportation lines, to other parts of the city, those held by Western powers. There lay the camps for displaced persons to which we bent our weary way.

It was still early on a Saturday morning and Berlin's subway train, which operated on a skeleton schedule only, had not started running. We were advised not to use bus and trolley lines, because of the many inspections. But it was no more advisable to stay in the area, loitering in the streets that were subject to Soviet rule. Weisstein and another family or two did something that surprised me—they knocked at the door of one of the houses. It was opened by an elderly German couple. They took us in, offered us chairs and sofas to rest on; they helped one of the mothers to warm a container of milk and served us a hot drink and slices of bread and jam.

A German family home. A half-basement floor in a concrete-built house. Windows jutting out of thick walls, facing the street. Through the heavy curtains we saw a small stone-paved square, gleaming with cleanliness, surrounded by colorful, toy-like houses, with slanted roofs like those on Swiss

postcards. A wooden floor covered in rugs. A massive wooden table, a cloth with lace embroidery draped over it. Mute, filtered light penetrates inside, discouraging the slightest sound, silhouetting the cups and plates arranged around the walls, the miniature porcelain figurines of animals scattered the length of the cabinet and shelves. On the walls hang embroidered works carrying sayings and proverbs in Gothic letters, on the order of "He who works the land has bread aplenty," and "Bless us, O Lord." Order and sobriety in everything. Deep in the house a polished kitchen range, wave upon wave of burnished brass utensils on one side and rows of spice and herb jars on the other.

I am in the house of a German family. They have probably been here for hundreds of years. On the walls hang the portraits of their ancestors in a certain order that none of them has ever disturbed; layer upon layer, generation after generation, with never a break. From here their descendants rose to kill and destroy.

Our hosts spoke little but treated us with courtesy. They even displayed a certain warmth. With decided generosity they showed consideration for our confused, weary, and wild appearance, our many bundles. The division of roles between us was clear with no need for talk. They had been defeated, and we were Jewish refugees belonging to the victorious side.

They lamented the trying times, the destruction all around—pointing out the bombed houses in their midst—the shortages of food and coal; they told, with lowered voices, tales of family members who had not returned from the war, their fate unknown.

No mention was made of certain subjects that both sides in the conversation were fully aware of. Already then I had an inkling of the frustration one feels in the face of the tragic symbiosis between victims and executioners. A few years ago I saw in our newspapers an astonishing advertisement: "Travel in Germany's trains to the finest health spas in the world."

Weak and exhausted, I sensed that important things were happening around me while I was unable to follow them. It was hard to take in the details and twists and turns of the hesitant conversation with our hosts. Even afterward, during our many stationed voyage on the subway—the first in my life—from

one end of Berlin to the other, I could not shake off the heavy fog and the shock.

We emerged somewhere from the dark tunnel and approached the camp gate. With shaky steps we passed a guard's booth and here we were, shipwrecked survivors coming into port, among our own people, Jews.

In The Camp

Jews, a crowd of Jews all around: the Schlachtensee Camp for Displaced Persons. Delegates and caretakers greet you warmly, offering clothing, packages of food, even pocket money. In the dining room food is abundant, tasty, and unlimited. In every way you are given to feel that you are here by right and not on sufferance, you are apparently to be pleased, pacified, compensated.

We were given a room, blankets. I underwent a meticulous registration process to receive an "index" certificate—identification papers from the occupying powers. I now had the honorable status of a D.P.—a displaced person, one without a home. With these papers I could wander the length and breadth of Europe, like thousands of other refugees, and receive support services in various camps.

I walked, awestruck, through the camp. On the one hand—it was a kind of huge ghetto: a former German military camp, surrounded by fences and gates, and in its barracks—the inhabitants. Broken families, individuals, Jews and non-Jews—everyone who was rescued from concentration camps and had ended up here. Motley human remnants from different peoples, children too; different languages, various dialects; quarrels and animosity, conspiracies; and black market business.

On the other hand it was a protective shelter. A stay unlimited in time and free of material worries for days on end. Some were lingering here in hopes of finding relatives, and some were hurrying east or west to their next waiting place. Some remained in order to recover, both materially and emotionally, and some got their bearings quickly, using the place as a base for wide-ranging deals, smuggling, and all the other black market tricks. Scores of camps throughout the occupied territory in Germany gave shelter to people

who had nowhere to go, who did not want to return to their place of origin, before the deluge.

Jewish life in the camp grew and flourished. Rabbis set up schools and synagogues, emissaries from Palestine founded youth clubs and training centers. Movies were shown at night. Bulletin boards were crammed with political posters and strange and varied announcements. On the margins of the boards were sad notes from one person seeking another one, his mother or sister, never ceasing to search and inquire.

Artists who had made an effort to come from America to encourage the survivors appeared during evenings of song and lectures. Everything was exciting and on the move, generating a form of security and prosperity. Once more I was among our kind; here I was wanted.

The next morning I went to the children's dining room and enjoyed cocoa, hot scrambled eggs, a fresh roll, and other superb dishes. My age made me a borderline case for the privilege of eating from the menu in this dining room, but because there were not many small children, they were not strict with me. At that hour the room was nearly empty; here and there a mother was spooning food into her baby with great solicitude. And suddenly there was a commotion, cries of protest and rage. A few women had come to pick up a hot meal for their children, as was their custom, but now there was a new rule in force—they had been warned beforehand—and they would no longer be allowed to take breakfast home to their children. They were to eat in the dining room itself. This enraged the mothers. What nerve! How could they be so cruel, forcing them to drag the child out of bed in the morning, making him come here instead of letting his mother serve him his meal, who had ever heard of such a thing! They forthwith announced a boycott and a picket line; they would never again set foot in this place, and they would prevent everyone else from entering as well. They would talk to the camp superintendents, and take it to the directors of the Joint (the American Joint Distribution Committee), the decree would not stand. At first I felt a deep contempt for these child-spoiling mothers, but I soon realized it was not a matter of ordinary mothers or ordinary motherhood. Even so, I was astounded by their demanding tone, to which I was completely unaccustomed.

That evening, in the same dining room, I noticed a piano. I went up to it and played some of the few songs I knew, and with a grave expression began writing down their notes in a notebook that I found there—"Hatikva" and "Suleyko", a popular Georgian love song that I liked. Right away I was joined by Moshelehs and Shlomelehs, children of shadows and cellars, who had / perhaps / never before heard the notes of that miraculous instrument. In Berlin I encountered—or perhaps it was already in Poland—the latest Hebrew songs. I thirstily soaked them up—songs have always been an essential part of my existence.

Arrangements for our trip to Munich had not yet come through, and we needed to wait for the right moment. So after checking out every corner of the camp itself, I went into the nearby neighborhood. I walked all along the shore of the lake. I saw many tall antennas, and large bunkers with raised concrete entrances, and many fences and warning signs for both, of land mines and of blind bombs. Everything was broken into and abandoned, and many papers lay scattered all over. I followed my nose into one of the bunkers. It was long and labyrinthine, even more than the model bomb shelter in our city, and full of rubbish and indeterminate objects. In one corner I found stacks of typewritten BBC broadcasts from the war years. I understood that I had stumbled into a German intelligence base.

There were news bulletins from June 1944 and a speech of Churchill's. For the first time I became curious to know what exactly had happened during the years of our imprisonment; did people outside know what we went through? Did they talk about it? Did anyone try to help? These questions remained with no clear answer even a generation later.

Weisstein tried by various means to continue our journey, but it was not a simple matter. The way from Berlin southward appeared to be blocked—to get there we needed special travel papers from the Soviet authorities, since upon leaving Berlin we would once more be traversing Soviet-occupied territory. He appealed to several agencies, made urgent calls to Munich, but for the time being to no avail. He berated himself for not taking the route through Czechoslovakia and Austria. But every smuggling route had its own dangers, disadvantages, and uncertainties. And there was a certain temptation, a

measure of security, in the movement with an organized and influential Jewish presence, so Weisstein had indeed preferred the route through Berlin.

As part of his efforts, we went one day to sign up with the Jewish community in the Russian sector of Berlin. We did not benefit much from joining, but I do retain a memory of the chilling feeling of alienation that accompanied our visit. After a long walk through forsaken streets, the congregation's rabbi, a stone-faced man, opened the door of his house and office. With oppressive silence, and without asking unnecessary questions, he sat down behind a piled-up desk to write us down in the congregation's roll books. He was evidently used to such pseudo-registrations and did not attach much importance to them. For my part, I was disturbed—might not even such innocent notes bring upon me the many-tentacled octopus of Solomina and the NKGB? Weisstein dismissed the possibility with a wave of his hand. How can the man be sure, I asked myself. "Such a young child—where does he get so many worries?" said the amused Weisstein.

Our outings brought us to the much-praised Unter den Linden Boulevard formerly the heart of the city. On either side slumped the ruins of hundreds of houses, and beside them the burned Reichstag and the charred Brandenburg Gate. Later, I imagined, when I grew up, and became an adolescent, a soldier perhaps, I would fly a huge B-47 bomber straight over this Berlin and release the atomic bomb I carried in my belly on it. My desire to do this was firm, except that I wavered sometimes; was Berlin target enough for my cargo, would its destruction satisfy me? /In 1946 I saw Berlin in all its desolation, its citizens cowed, finding their way by broken paths through the wreckage of what were once famous streets and squares, with tattered German prisoners being led to clear and clean their half-destroyed capital city. Accordingly, I extended my plans to take more bombs and drop them, methodically and single-mindedly, on every city in Germany, not sparing a single one. I never worked out the details of this thought. At some point in the planning a fog of distraction would always settle over me, like the fog that keeps airplanes from taking off on their missions.

One day Weisstein suggested—perhaps in jest—that I join him on a visit to a nightclub, what he called a cabaret. Ever the Puritan, I declined his embarrassing invitation.

Once Weisstein tried to attach us to an American military convoy, and another time he tried joining a group of refugees that received permission to take a train west—but in vain. Was I very frustrated by these delays? I think not. I was used to obstacles in my path. In all, our stay in Schlachtensee lasted about two weeks. One day I was told there was a way out.

Fifth Journey / To Nuremberg / March

It was the days when the Nuremberg trials were just starting. To the Schlachtensee camp came Walter Bernstein, one of the veteran American journalists who covered these major international trials. He came in his private car for a tour of the displaced persons camps in Berlin. Weisstein struck up a conversation with him and asked him to help us get to Munich. He introduced me as well. He talked to us a little and later that evening gave his consent—he could take us to Nuremberg, where he was staying. If all went well we would reach our destination in two days. From there to Munich it was only a few more hours. Weisstein hurried to pass this message on to Father, and we got ready for the last part of our journey.

On a spring-like morning in March we got under way. I was in the clouds—a ride in a private car for hundreds of kilometers! Until then I had ridden in a taxi only twice—once to bring my little sister home from the hospital and once when Mishka's grandfather took us to the sawmills, all before the war.

Weisstein sat next to Bernstein, I in back, and with much curiosity I began following our crossing of the great city of Berlin. Improvised road signs in English, put up by the military police, meticulously directed us to a specific point in the western part of the city, all the while repeatedly warning that we were nearing the end of the area under the Western armies' jurisdiction. From here we had a journey of several hours through the Soviet zone before arriving in the territory occupied by the other forces. Because Bernstein was a reporter equipped with all the passes required, we expected no particular difficulty in crossing the Soviet sector.

The British guard at the last Western barrier refused to let us proceed. Without the appropriate documents, he claimed, the Soviets would not let us

through. Bernstein tried arguing with him, but to no avail—Bernstein could continue his journey, but without us. We, he ruled with polite insistence, would have to get out of the car and return to Berlin. What desolation. With heavy hearts we began removing our baggage from the vehicle, then got ready to take leave of Bernstein, but at the last minute he tried a different tack. The boy, he asked. Will you let me take him with me? And he told a little of my story.

The British agreed to let me go on, but Weisstein had to turn back. After quickly conferring, the two decided on the following plan—Bernstein would take me alone and Weisstein would look for another way to come after us. I was asked if I agreed with the plan, or whether I preferred to return with Weisstein to Berlin. He himself urged me to continue my journey, merely asking that we report the mishap concerning him at the first opportunity. I hesitated. I felt attached to this man. For a month and a half I had been in his company, going everywhere he went. Now to be get cut off him? I was just like a young lamb in my flock in the Jezreel valley, which clings tenaciously to the first creature that offers a milk-filled teat or bottle, whether its mother or the shepherd. And furthermore, if something went wrong—I had already seen it happen—what would I do alone, and in Germany of all places? But the practical considerations prevailed—my first goal was to reach my father and he was no longer far away. I had to let go and take the risk.

And so we parted hurriedly, with a certain constraint on my part, a feeling as if I was betraying Weisstein. I got back in the car, and Bernstein and I took off. I looked back and saw Weisstein standing at the guard booth, waiting to hitch a ride back to the city.

So once again I changed companions and protectors. I understood that nothing bad would happen to Weisstein—in a few days we would probably meet again. The unruffled behavior of Bernstein also calmed me, and I surrendered to the sights of the road before us.

Our path wound westward at first, towards Hanover, I believe. The ground was flat and the traffic—military, most of it—was heavy. This was the main access corridor of the Allied forces to and from Berlin. After a few hours of travel, we passed Magdeburg, and reached the furthest boundary of the Soviet-occupied territory. My tension at going through the last barrier may

have seemed exaggerated, but it was a great relief to cross into the British zone. We went south toward Kassel, the terrain rose, riverbeds grew deeper, and I felt the tension inside me melt. No additional borders loomed for the rest of my journey. I took pleasure in the speed of the car.

Most of our route stretched along excellent highways, products of Hitler's Reich. I was sorry to see how little war damage was evident in these excellent roads—although here and there we had to skirt a large crater, and in river valleys we were forced into long and complicated detours because of the destruction of so many bridges and sections of roads that had been built on pillars.

On both sides of the road stretched picturesque fields and towns, hints of castle turrets disappearing behind the crowns of trees on hilltops, many forests and rivers—a pastoral view that held no interest for me then, any more than it does now.

Bernstein was very nice to me. Our conversation was in fractured Yiddish and faulty German. He regaled me with offers of military rations that he had in his bag, whose contents fascinated me, representing in my eyes all the power and wealth of America—packages of Wrigley's chewing gum, Hershey's chocolate bars, Kraft cheese, rubbery tubes of sweetened condensed milk, canned meat and sardines, even some wonderful cocoa powder, with an aroma reminiscent of home. He himself chain-smoked much sought-after Camel cigarettes, and he had unlimited gas vouchers. I enjoyed being in the company of such all-powerful abundance. I never met him again after our ride. When I began years later to make inquiries, I found out he had died a few years after our shared journey. Walter Bernstein. I must one day look up the articles he wrote in those days, perhaps even seek out his family.

And as for Weisstein, as it turned out, he did not go back to Berlin that day. At the checkpoint, perhaps not entirely by chance, was a man from the Jewish Brigade of the British army. After a brief wait, when no car going back toward Berlin came by, the man approached the Soviet barrier—it was still possible in those days—and cordially pleaded with the Russian to let Weisstein through. "Poor refugee, we just split him and his kid up. Come on, let him go on." The guard agreed. Weisstein caught a ride to a nearby city, where he caught a train that took him southwest without any further incident.

While I was in Germany, we met once or twice more. During the coming years I heard conflicting stories about his fate from my father. I know that for a while he was the head of the Jewish community in Mannheim; once I understood that he went as far away as South Africa; and another time, that he settled down in Germany and got rich. In any case, the man evidently remained without a family and died alone. I wish I could find his traces.

That evening we reached Frankfurt am Main, a large city that was complicated to cross. Bernstein tried to get me a place to sleep through a large Jewish community office there, but without result.

When he despaired of housing me among Jews—and he spent a good long hour trying—he took me to his military hotel as a guest in his room. I did not understand at first why he bothered, to look for a room for me after a long day spent driving. In my feverish adolescent imagination, I thought I must have been spoiling certain plans he had that evening.

The next morning we continued our journey. I didn't know whether Father was already in Nuremberg waiting for me or whether he would reach me later. I did know, however, that at the end of that day I would reach the end of my journey. Few are the days—although I have had my share—when, within the space of a day, life can change completely.

What was I feeling that day and in the following days, heading for my meeting with Father? I wanted a protective father who would take me in his arms and say: from now on, son, your troubles are mine, I will take care of you. What would I say to him, what would the first words be when we met, how would we tell one another everything that happened to us during the fifteen hundred days since we parted; what do I remember of all I had to tell him from Mother, how would I describe my sister, whom he had almost not known in her short span of flowering; we would need entire days and nights to sit and do nothing but talk, talk and, talk. And where would we live, how would we try being together again, two instead of four, how would we be a family again without Mother? And perhaps he already had a new woman, another one, in his life?

At twilight we reached Nuremberg. Bernstein expertly navigated his vehicle to a villa in one of the suburbs. It had belonged to a senior Nazi official, and was now occupied by American officers dealing with and for the Jews—people of the “Joint” or another army aid unit. It was a handsome two-storied building

with a row of rooms, surrounded by a garden. Although the house had not been confiscated by the army, some of the former servants had remained, including the original estate manager, who kept an eye on his master's possessions.

We were greeted cordially by a number of people, some of them in American military uniform, most of them Jewish. It was apparent that they had already heard about me and they were openly curious to see me. I thanked Bernstein to the best of my ability, we said good-bye, and he went on his way. I was invited to supper with the entire staff. Later I was brought to a lovely room, where one of the servants had made up a nice soft bed. I sank into it as in a dream.

A series of telephone calls the next day ascertained that within a day or two, Father could apparently come to get me himself. Until then I could stay here. Most of the people went out to work, and I began poking around the villa. Almost immediately I discovered that the guest room walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. I had never before seen such a large private library. Row upon row of colorful book covers, sets of finely bound volumes, books of many sizes were neatly arranged and cared for. Most of the day went by while I browsed the length of the shelves. That all the books were in German, most of them in Gothic print, did not disturb me. And yet I could not forget who had owned the collection. When the Americans saw how much interest I had in books, they said to me—take all you want, adding with a wink—just don't let the house manager see you.

huge windows stretched the full height of the wall. Between the bookshelves in the middle were wide doors that opened into a large garden. I had never before seen such a villa and such windows.

Among the staff one young woman paid special attention to me and treated me kindly. Evening came, and she asked me to join her for a special night at the opera. I was not sure about saying yes—in my boyish way, I saw this night, like the previous night in Frankfurt, as a potential arena for flirtation and romance by young people that I would only spoil. She overrode my protests—everything would be fine, I was no bother at all. She would enjoy taking me, especially after hearing me say that I liked opera. And so I raised, with much embarrassment, yet another objection—how could I come with her in the

shabby, ill-fitting clothes I had been traveling in, which I had received from the Berlin Joint. She looked me over kindly and declared that there was nothing wrong with my somewhat too roomy clothes and, she added, the coat I had on looked quite suitable.

And so, in spite of my deep reservations, we went to the opera after dinner. We were late—the entire staff of the house had gone before us and we almost didn't find a car to take us. Our late arrival did not bother my companion at all. She commanded the cowed ushers to take us inside to the best available seats. With a mixture of embarrassment and disapproval, they opened one of the doors and we found ourselves in a private box, one of the plushest ones in the central balcony.

The Nuremberg opera house! Heavy crystal chandeliers, velvet curtains, tier upon tier of balconies decorated with gold and purple flowers, a festive crowd in its best clothes, an inspiring sight the likes of which I had never seen in our city. On the stage was, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in one act, performed by the best singers. After the intermission there was another short opera, by Donizetti, I believe.

It was a special gala performance in honor of the international court. In the central gallery just across from us sat the venerable judges and delegates from the victorious

nations and their entourages, and my searching gaze wandered alternately from the stage to them and back. Only a year or two before, these theater seats had been occupied by those now sitting on the defendants' bench.

During the intermission, the elegant audience promenaded slowly in an elliptical course through the spacious corridors, to a lavish reception in the glittering vestibule, and among the crowd – as in a surrealistic play – me, a boy of twelve and a half with an oversized coat. Only last night I had landed here from another world, after an interplanetary journey of hundreds of light years, and here I find myself treading in a shining palace in the enemy city Nuremberg. In my big coat I wanted to be swallowed up by one of the walls. Without the slightest hesitation my hostess took me along wherever she went, totally ignoring my ridiculous appearance. Only when she tried entering the hard-liquor bar with me did an insistent usher prevent her in spite of her entreaties. Children are not allowed, he declared.

I felt tired and out of place. Much later, during my visit to Rabbi Klausner in New York, thanks to whom I got closer to my father—and who was then the Reform rabbi for Yonkers and a well-known art connoisseur—I told him, among other things, about this pathetic episode in Nuremberg, which I was unable to forget. He could not stop laughing. “That must have been the lively Fox girl,” he decided. “She’s now a doctor in Chicago.” I diligently started looking for her using lists of that city’s doctors, telephone books, Chicago’s “Women of Hadassah,” all in vain. Not everyone is bound to illuminate my memories.

The next morning we were sitting down to a late breakfast when messengers came in with the news: your father is here.

I did not have enough time to go out to meet him. I just got up, moved a short space away from the table, and already a boat on the river made a short graceful turn and hove ashore. Several people disembarked, all smiling, looking at me with faces that I didn’t recognize. But the eyes of one sparkled more than the rest. Everyone was looking at me and I understood that I had a definite part to play. So I turned to the man with the most welcoming look and fell into his arms, murmuring broken words, something like “at last,” or “after all these years,” perhaps both phrases together.

We hugged, and probably kissed. Father immediately straightened up, took a step back so that he could reach into his pocket, and pulled out a wrapped present, a watch. With a kindly expression he put it on me. He may have fumbled a little with the strap or the buckle.

At that point, as in an opera, we were joined by the others on the stage: the journalist Klugman, Father’s friend, who had driven him here, Klugman’s redheaded son, and others from the local staff surrounded us. They all talked and smiled, looked on, perhaps were excited. My eyes may have shed a tear or two, but I did not cry. Neither did Father.

Then we were invited back to the table. It may have been lunchtime already; I do not remember the details. We all sat down to eat. Throughout the meal, Father talked incessantly with the people around him, occasionally throwing me a warm glance, then continuing his conversation.

After dinner we had time to look at the Nazi’s large library. Father looked at various shelves, browsing and wondering. When he heard that I had been

invited to take a few books, he helped me choose them, and I took away three volumes (in Gothic typeface) of Mark Twain's writings.

Sixth Journey / To Munich / March

By the time the car brought us to the outskirts of Munich, Father had managed to tell me where he lived. Unlike most of the survivors, who lived in displaced persons (DP) camps, Father, by reason of his work in the city and perhaps also because of the medical treatment he was receiving, lived inside Munich itself. He spent the first half-year or so in hospital, at first because of ill health, later merely to get stronger and have a temporary place to live. In the meantime he began working for the survivors institutions. Later he was able to get a room with a family inside the city, where he was now living. As we got closer to the place, he described to me the special character of the quarter, named after its builder, Borstei—it had been built to house employees of the nearby power plant. His landlords were Germans but—he hastened to add—they were reasonable, anti-Nazi, and in fact communists at heart, and their attitude toward him was good, very good. They, too, for their part, had suffered terribly during the war—their only daughter had committed suicide when she heard that her husband was killed on the eastern front. This, as it later turned out, was also the source of my white accordion, an 80-bass key Hohner, which Father bought for me later and brought as a gift to Israel, and which has been with me at all stages of my life. I should also to know—Father whispered to me quickly before we entered the apartment—the Knabenschuh family put a high value on neatness and order, it was one of these things they were very strict about and would not willing to forgo. I would have to be very careful about it.

The owners of the house opened the door. My first impression was that they were quite old. Frau Knabenschuh was tall and thin, with a long thin face, black hair drawn carefully back and ending in a tidy braid. Through the rectangular frames of her glasses she gave me a warm and friendly look. Her husband was older than she, white-haired, also bespectacled, a little withdrawn and shy. He worked as a technician or engineer at the power plant. The apartment sparkled and shone; the floor was waxed, dishes gleamed, the beds were high and fluffy, piled with blankets and topped with a cover folded

in straight angles without a wrinkle, as in that house in Berlin. They put me into Father's room, where another bed, large and deep, had already been made up for me.

They offered me a hot bath with a large, sweetly scented towel. Mrs. Knabenschuh treated me—the *bub* (boy) she called me—to good, homemade food, perhaps hot cocoa and chocolate. In the coming days she discovered that my favorite dish was cornflour pudding with cocoa, and she made it for me every morning thereafter.

Through the thick curtains I saw the silhouette of the huge gas tanks that fed the factory, which stood next to the main road. At the time, I did not know that this road also led to Dachau and was named after it, Dachau Road.

Did we talk any more that night? I dove into warm featherbed quilts with shiny satin. Once more, the first night in a new place. Beside the bed was a rug bearing the image of a springing tiger, far down the hall shone a tiny bulb. Did this one also shine on a crucified savior?

The next day, through the window, I saw a row of six-storied apartment houses, presenting a uniform facade of windows, balconies, and side doors. I had never before seen such a large block of buildings. For the first part of the new morning Father spent a good long while showing me how to negotiate the labyrinth of buildings with their identical entrances, each marked by a large letter of the Latin alphabet. The unique design by Borstei, said Father, was that the building included a laundry, a common supply of gas, service corridors to take out garbage, and even an electric tram that wound through the buildings. Father explained to me where to find the nearest station of this train and which city station I could reach to change lines, whenever I might want to visit him where he worked. He did not neglect to detail the necessary considerations of what time of day to make such a journey, since during rush hours the ticket price was higher. He drilled me on our new address—Lampadius 28b, fourth floor, and on and on. Once again he reminded me how important it was that I keep order in the house, where every object had to be put back exactly where it belonged, every crease had to be smoothed, and every speck of dirt or likely source of pollution required immediate and unconditional removal.

I remember the next few days only in a general way. As is the case for several other periods, certain segments of time escape me, are swallowed up and gone.

Father tells how, as soon as I came, I began pestering him to send a telegram to Ettele for her birthday—in mid-March she turned fourteen. I begged him to make use of the all-powerful Chaplain Klausner to get it done. I may also have meant to send thereby a covert message to those who knew me that I had safely arrived.

Already in the first few days Father took me to his workplace at the Central Committee for Liberated Jews. He introduced me to his supervisors and co-workers. All of them heard about me and my adventurous journey. Father worked on the historical committee and for the survivors' newspaper, *Unzer Veg* ("Our Path") Once more I spent time with him in settings familiar to me from before—manuscripts, proof sheets, lead casts, wise old typesetters and editors. I was an attraction and the object of everyone's attention.

Photo: The newspaper staff is being photographed with me. They surround me, leaning toward me, seated in the center, my head slumping forward so far that my face is almost not visible. Father stands to one side, as usual straight as a soldier at attention.

And another photograph, the first of me alone taken after the war: I am standing beside the steps of the survivors' committee building. Bright, sad eyes, wavy hair, short trousers under my coat, loose socks up to my knees, holding on to the newel-post I try to go deep into the picture as I look at it, to penetrate the image staring back: who was I? What did I feel?

On several occasions my father told me a little about what had happened to and around him during those years. How he was nearly hanged because they found writing materials among his belongings; how once during a short rest the man next to him suddenly died of heartbreak over having missed some job that morning that guaranteed a large piece of bread. And although these were strong snippets of stories, I felt that Father was choosing them, holding back from me the full story of how he lived from day to day. He never told me any details, not then and not later. He had, however, deduced moral precepts from the course of his adventures: walk humbly. Be not envious, be not

greedy; have no strong ambition; be ordinary and do not stand out. Thus he would explain the miracle of his survival.

Two or three days later Father turned to me in the street and said: Do you see that sign down the street? I see it, I said. Can you see what it says? Yes, I replied. Now I'll do it, he said, closing one eye and reading the sign's contents. Then he closed his other eye and read it again. What is so remarkable in that? I asked him. At the end of the war, only a month before the surrender, they had been taken on a death march on the roads of Bavaria; even at that late hour the Germans never loosened their hold on their prey, driving them without mercy, and people were dropping like flies. Father's knee was bad from a previous incident when a German soldier had pushed him into sharp, rusty barbed wire. An infected abscess had developed, causing him to lie several weeks in the *Krankenbude*—a hut for the sick (this is also the title of a story Father wrote). He got what treatment they gave, the abscess was opened and cut, and by good fortune he slowly recovered without being selected for elimination. Now, during this cruel march in southern Germany, his swollen knee got the better of him and he fainted with pain, dropping on the side of the road. The collection squad that came after them threw him into the cellar of an abandoned building, where lay the bodies waiting for disposal. Had one of the body buriers—who arrived later—not been one of his acquaintances, he would have met his end that day. Seeing signs of life in Father's face, the man woke him and took him to a kind of first aid station, and so he remained alive. Who the man was I do not know. When Father, unconscious, had been thrown down, he received a blow—his head had evidently hit the floor—and he lost his sight in his right eye. A day or two later the Americans arrived and liberated them all. Father—a walking corpse weighing only thirty-two kilograms—a Mussulman in the derisive terms of the Germans—was taken to a hospital where he received medical attention for a long time.

The Gordian knot, the symbiotic bond between the victim and his murderers. It was a German hospital, and Father received many weeks of dedicated treatment from respectable professors who, only a few days before, had been helping high-level Nazis. Thanks to their efforts, Father slowly regained his strength. When they checked his eyes, only one of his many afflictions, they

found no damage to the ophthalmic nerve or in the eye itself. There was a good chance, they said, that the dead eye would one day revive. And here—Father concluded his story—the day after our meeting in Nuremberg he discovered that his eye was functioning. At first he didn't believe it, until he checked himself, again and again, every few hours. Now he was absolutely sure of it, both eyes were really working. So it seems that Father was very moved by our meeting, even if I couldn't tell.

But of Mother and my sister, he never said a word, never mentioned them; he never spoke with me of his pain, his longing for the wife and daughter that he lost. More than that—fifty years went by before Father admitted to his eldest granddaughter that to this very day he is unable even to say the names of his dear ones, his daughter and first wife, my mother, in the Yizkor prayer on Yom Kippur. And I know the thought bothers him that I, his son, might certainly believe he has forgotten, but even talking to me about it is beyond his power.

My days with Father in Munich. Years later, I found myself returning to the memories, feverishly and stubbornly, slowly and repeatedly rolling back the film of the twenty-some days I spent with him in Munich, repeatedly poring over the first hours of the journey from Nuremberg, like a man who has lost something on his way home and tries to retrace his steps, to understand how and why it happened, how it began in the first place.

We met on Sabbath, on the eve of Purim, in Nuremberg. In the first moments he gave me a watch. In the taxi on the way to Munich, I sat on his left in the back seat. Klugman, as I recall, sat in front beside his redheaded son, and there may have been another man who went with us, I do not remember. Perhaps they asked me about the latest stages of my journey, when did I leave Lithuania, when Poland, how it was in Berlin. We talked about the affair of the four trucks, the news of it having reached this far. Klugman must certainly have added that he too had been with us in the ghetto and knew Mother well. Father spoke, of course he spoke incessantly—whether saying things to me meant also for Klugman and his son, or turning specifically to those around him and talking with them. The way to Munich went quickly. And this was also the model for my next three weeks with Father—he spoke to me, spoke with the people to whom I was introduced, he never stopped

talking. And isn't that just how he behaved at the Democrat Square, and during the selection for Riga?

He talked and talked, but never once turned to me with the question: what did you go through, my child, what happened to you?

Certainly he was bruised and battered, weak and enfeebled. He was a wreck of a man, a Mussulman. He did not ask because it hurt too much. I was for him the only living reminder of a world that had been destroyed, of his father's house, of his wife and small daughter who died. That is the logical, dry explanation.

He never asked. Why should he ask? After all, he worked for the history committee. Already during the first days of his recovery he would slip out of his sickbed and go to Flakkaserne, formerly a German air force camp in Munich. There they began concentrating the first survivors, and there he took / testimony, including no doubt from people from our ghetto. What need had he for me to tell him the history of the ghetto?

What happened to me, to me and no one else, what I had lived through and was hurt by, what frightened me and grieved me, how I worried and feared—he never discovered that, because he never asked.

One day in Munich we went for a long night walk to visit friends on the other side of the city, perhaps on a Friday evening. Once more, as long ago, we strode side by side a long way and were free to talk about any subject that came up. Father spent that extended walk discussing Hebrew grammar. He told me about certain rules, four in number, governing the weak syllable *schwa* in Hebrew punctuation. Another time, during a long trip by train, he drilled me on the five rules for the definite article.

(**) And I think to myself if, God forbid, I was in his place, meeting my own son in the same circumstances, I would rush upon him like a lion, with a roar, hug him and kiss and cry and press him to my breast never stopping never ceasing to murmur and speak and chuckle and with eyes closed and endless tears squeeze his hand and not let go even for a single instant, not even for a fraction of an instant, and all the while asking and answering without hearing what was said, just both of us talking and talking both at once, both interrupting the other, never stopping, never ceasing day and night, without

end, to the last of our strength until, half fainting, wrung out and emptied, we would fall into a brief sleep. And then we would wake, and go on and on until slowly, like the Sambatyon river that gathers its strength anew and rests from its rage, we would grow calm and be still and a little sated until in the next outbreak we tried to fill what was taken away never to return during the four years one month and two weeks, in all one thousand four hundred and ninety-eight days and nights of the separation forced upon us. (**)

When I had the chance, years later, to raise this embarrassing topic with my elderly father, he answered me with dry directness. Yes, he said, he remembered that Mrs. Knabenschuh told him even then that I had complained to her about a father who does not hug me at all.

Father continued to do his regular work, and left me in the house in the company and under the care of Frau Knabenschuh. Once I knew the way, I would leave at noon to visit him in his office, which was housed in the Central Committee building, and we would sometimes return together. Eventually I became familiar with the area around the office buildings, including the next street over, Mehlstrasse—the center of the Jewish black market—whose name became a byword for the wretchedness of Jewish existence in Germany after the World War.

The matter of my studies preoccupied Father. I had lost the regular lessons of at least the last half year, not to mention the years before. Until arrangements were made, he asked that I begin to study alone, at least by reading the Bible. I agreed. He suggested that I start with the book of Amos—during the day I was to learn certain passages by heart, and at night I would recite them to him.

And so mornings I stayed behind alone in the neat, gleaming flat with Mrs. Knabenschuh, studying chapters of the Bible. A dream and its solution. On the one hand, I wanted to please Father, but on the other I felt inside a fierce resistance to the tiresome rote learning of heavy texts. I conceived another arrangement that seemed logical to me: instead of memorizing incomprehensible passages from Amos, I would memorize some of the Jewish Brigade songs that I found on Father's shelves. That way I could impress him with my ability; he could not say I was lazy.

The songs I chose inspired and appealed to me, gave me a feeling of pride and belonging.

I felt the need to tell Mrs. Knabenschuh about this curriculum of mine, apparently out of a need to enlist support for the change I was making. The good-hearted lady weighed my alternative proposal in a unique way—she took thread and measured the length of the two passages, the prophecy of the visionary Amos on the one hand, and the “Regiment Song” that I recited to her on the other, and came to the sober conclusion that my idea was a reasonable one; the deal seemed honest and there was no deceit in it. On his return that evening, I showed Father my progress for the day, accompanied by the helpful opinion of Mrs. Knabenschuh. Father answered what he answered and I had no idea that from this matter a literary anecdote would grow. What he felt in the face of my business-like exchange I discovered only a year later, when I came across a feuilleton that he wrote in response to the incident. He published it in *Nitzotz* the journal of the Zionist Youth Movement and continuation of the underground newsletter of our ghetto and the camps. His sketch portrays the ironic situation in which a German woman approves of the daily scope of studies for a Jewish child and Holocaust survivor—a secular song in place of that prophet of wrath, Amos—by measuring the two in centimeters.

What else did I do during those days in Munich?

I was introduced to Chaim Hoffman-Yachil, the chief representative of the Jewish Agency among the survivors, and I went to thank Chaplain Abraham Klausner in person for his role in bringing me here. I met Weisstein and other survivors who claimed they remembered me from the ghetto.

It was then that the source of the emissaries to me became clear. In the course of his work taking evidence from survivors, Father heard from /people from our city that a bright little boy was taking part in plays, reciting and singing. His heart told him it was his son. He sent a messenger. Upon receiving my positive answer, he enlisted the aid of a central figure among the survivors, Rabbi Abraham Klausner, the principal chaplain for the American occupation forces in Germany. This good man occupied himself, among other matters, with operating a network of emissaries who brought child survivors from the east to their relatives in the west. Thus he reached me.

Father added that at one point he thought of going on his own, but he felt he could not depend on having the strength and ability to bring me.

He paid a price for this help. In the time to come, after I had already continued my journey to Palestine, Father's employers in the Central Committee persisted, with no small amount of cynicism, in reminding him—we took the trouble to bring your son here, now pay up by continuing your vital work and do not leave. So my grateful father postponed his own aliyah (immigration to Palestine). It was two and a half more years before he too made it, by then to the state of Israel

Natives of our city stood out in those days as leaders of the survivors. The chief rabbi was Snyeg, whose wife had given me the precious school stamp. At the head of the survivors' organization stood Dr. Zalman Greenberg, formerly head of the Pilz-Fabrik brigade, Mother's brigade. I met them both. And therefore I might—it occurs to me now—have talked to Greenberg and others about Mother. At the time there were many who knew her from the ghetto, who saw her in the last days, perhaps even during her last hours. But my hands were heavy..

We went to the hospital at St. Otilien to visit our relative Hadassah. She was on her deathbed with tuberculosis, which she contracted during the ghetto years and while in hiding, roaming in the forests. With her was her young son Yossele, whom she had managed to save and put in the care of Lithuanians. A Catholic priest, who admired her extensive knowledge of the Talmudic complexities aided her in this rescue, among others. I had been present at Yosseleh's circumcision ceremony and in his grandfather's house I had first held, high above my head, a *havdalah* candle at the conclusion of Shabbat. What would now become of this little boy staying beside his dying mother?

Father told me that my friends Michael Kaplan and his family had arrived, and that they were in the Fernwald refugee camp. I went with Father to see them. The camp made no particular impression on me—an open Jewish ghetto on the model of Berlin's Schlachtensee, situated like most of the DP camps—absurdly—in a former concentration camp, an additional price the survivors had to pay for remaining alive inside Germany. The meeting with Michael was a joyous one—the first friend from there that I found here. Right away I raised the question—what about the collection of ghetto songs? For I had diligently

gathered them while we were in the ghetto, but had later lost them. My good fortune was that Michael had also been one of the collectors. I sat down immediately to copy them. I gave the songs to Father, who published them little by little under their collectors' names, Michael's and mine, in the historical periodical "Fun Letztn Churbn" ("From the Last Cataclysm") that he edited.

Father wanted me at his side. But what could he do with me, practically speaking; how, in a German city, could he take care of my studies, my social life? If he were staying in one of the DP camps, with educational facilities and boarding schools, the situation would have been simpler. In his current circumstances, a physical and emotional wreck—twelve months after liberation—he was not up to keeping me with him.

When I joined him, his old goal of immigrating to Palestine returned and grew. There he was likely to solve the problem of an educational framework for me. But certificates, in a quota of 1,500 licenses to immigrate, rationed out each month by the British, were hard to come by. Now that I had arrived, Father hoped his chances were better. In his letter to his sister Rachel in Palestine he told her of my arrival and asked her to obtain certificates for us, despite the fact that she, only an elementary school teacher, did not really have access to the people who made such decisions.

One day, before I had been even a month in Munich, Father learned that a group of children within the Youth Aliya framework was being sent to Palestine with certificates. There was a chance I could join them, but we had to decide fast. He resolved to take advantage of the opportunity and send me to his sister, even though he had not yet received her consent in advance.

I was fitted with more clothes from the Central Committee's stores, and Father's friends charged me with greetings for their relatives in Tel Aviv. One morning we left—once again—to a large open lot, next to the train station.

Photo: I am seated beside Father among many bundles, beside me a large backpack—a big-bellied, green German "rucksack" with wide leather straps. We sit looking thoughtfully at one another, keeping silent.

The Seventh Journey / To the Land of Israel / April

The train set out early in the afternoon, stopping in Frankfurt where we picked up other passengers. Its final destination was Marseilles on the Mediterranean coast. So unique was this event that years afterward I ran across articles about it, even in the *New York Times*.

It was a special effort to transport hundreds of children, all survivors of the Holocaust, for whom certificates had been obtained. By and large the children were orphans, having lost one or both parents. We consisted of groups that had formed in refugee camps, on farms and in training camps under the auspices of various political groups in Eretz Israel (Palestine). In one respect it was also a hospital train, a special world set off to roll on tracks. Every passenger on our train, and later every one on board the ship, carried within himself his own wounds which he hoped to heal.

Passionate speeches were made just before we left. Flags and slogans were waved outside the windows, and signs in colored chalk on the sides of the railroad cars proclaimed that here were Jewish children bound for Eretz Israel. Each group was assigned a car or part of one, which it filled with its own peculiar character – its own songs, parades, and ceremonies, performed for itself and in fierce competition and quarrels with its neighbors. They attached me to a small group of the Beitar Youth movement, because it was led by Naphtali Magid, a Lithuanian and a friend of my father. From then and for the duration of the trip by rail and boat, I was part of this group. The Beitar Youth held assembly each night that was rich in ceremony, raising and lowering a national flag, ardently singing the group's anthem. All of us stood silent, tense, and at attention when we heard the word, "glory, challenge, honor; climb and conquer the mountain."

And why to Eretz Israel of all places? One of the few privileges of refugees, who are homeless and have nothing, is the ease with which they can adopt for themselves a new dream, a new goal to realize. In my immediate surroundings, the question of where to go was never even raised: we took it for granted that our sights were set on one place only, Eretz Israel.

The rumbling of the train wheels had a single, clear-cut meaning – the wait was over, there was no going back.

Because it was a special train, we often had to stop and wait, sometimes for hours, until the line became clear. We exploited every chance we had to get out from behind locked doors; during stops we spread out like chicks in a field, until the engine's sharp whistle blew, signaling without advance warning that our journey was resuming. We appointed special monitors to ensure that no one wandered far from the cars and that no one was left behind in some out-of-the-way station.

We spent four days and nights on the train. Especially at night, suspicions crept in: perhaps the way would no longer be clear; perhaps there would be a horrendous crash; it might also happen that at one of the stations, when cars were detached and rejoined, a number of cars might be left behind – better to stay on guard here too; as everywhere else, better be always alert and prepared for the worst.

In my car I met a boy named Gabriel who, like me, had been in a ghetto (Tchenstochov) and had hidden with the Polish. Like me, he did not belong socially to the group we were in, and he was also a “good boy”—quiet reserved, and different from the others. We found ourselves sitting at the entrance to the car, where we even slept out in the open, leaning against each other back to back.

At daylight on the last day of the journey, we approached a large city, as evidenced by fenced enclosures, warehouses, factories, and clusters of houses spilling into suburbs. At one point, we plunged into a long tunnel like the one at the exit from the city of my birth. We emerged—after too long - into the heart of Marseilles, in the middle of a slope on which houses and streets sprawled to the sea.

At one tip of a bay a camp waited for us, nestled up against distinctive sharp cliffs. Here we had to wait for our ship. Before us lay the sea whose other side lapped the shores of Eretz Israel.

The next day already we set out to climb the cliffs. All of our pent-up energy, the anticipation we could barely conceal, we poured into clambering over boulders, scaling the slopes to the summit above us.

Gabriel and I climbed together. We stayed apart from the others, trying to outdo them by getting farther ahead and mounting higher. Every hilltop we reached we gave a different name – Zion, Herzl, Jerusalem – which we

shouted from atop the cliffs in a loud voice. It is perhaps not by chance that some years later Gabriel and I, each following his own path, became experts in the geography of Israel, working also as tour guides .

Several days of waiting went by. When would we set sail? Would the ship really come? Would the trip be canceled? Every day new groups of children joined us. Would there be room for them all? Passover was approaching; it looked as if we would still be on land the night of the Seder. Various visitors began to reach us—soldiers of the Jewish Brigade, public personages, survivors from places nearby. Such a large concentration of children raised hopes that they might find lost relatives, or at least gain information about them.

Passover evening. Neatly arranged tables were put out on the asphalt pavement between the camp buildings. The entire assembly, close upon a thousand people, feasted together with songs and readings, sheltered by the white cliffs gleaming in the full moonlight. Delegates said blessings, rabbis spoke, “today you are as bondsmen, next year freemen: today you are slaves of your memories here, tomorrow or the next day you will sail to Eretz-Israel and be free.”

On the third day of Passover we left for the ship. Huge and white, a gigantic wall looming above the pier, studded with little round windows like precious stones. Like grasshoppers we encircled the ship, gazing up in amazement: throngs of children filled her decks, waving banners and cheering; where had so many Jewish children come from?

As if sitting in a theater, their faces were turned to the pier below where a number of public figures, delegates, and guides were standing and returning greetings to the tumultuous galleries with broad sweeps of their arms.

Scene: The delegate from the Jewish Agency standing on the pier manages to establish eye contact with a boy on the fourth deck of the ship. She signals to him: “Yossele, sing us something!” and he breaks out in a pleasant, strong voice:

*Sing out, our future's song
Song of renewal, of building our land!*

At the sound of the pure and beautiful voice the crowd grows quiet, and the many-tiered human wall, like a quivering coral reef, like a field of wheat shimmering in the wind, gradually joins in singing, a mighty and passionate song that rolls over us from all sides. The voices rise like waves in the river as ships pass one another along green banks adorned with forests. *End of Scene.*

This song, too, we sang with full voice:

*To you we sing, our land, our mother,
The laborer's song of songs,
We are sons of one mother alone, our mother,
To you alone we belong.
To you we call, our mother, —ah, mother,
Awake, it is the break of dawn.*

Cautiously, we walked up the long and trembling gangway to the head of the gently swaying giant, this large white ship, and were guided into one of the holds below. As on riverboats, here too we had round portholes shut with large screws.

We lay down our bundles and immediately burst onto the decks to watch the preparations all about us. In a few days this very ship with its decks and passengers will anchor off the shores of Eretz Israel. It was hard to believe. Her sailors exuded a confidence that roused envy. On the ship's deck, I outlined a letter that I planned to send to Father. My notes are still with me, undeciphered, to this day.

The *Champollion*, 18,000 tons. We were told it was the biggest passenger ship to ply the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, a fact that filled us with pride. Our worries about the danger of sailing the sea subsided somewhat. Newspaper accounts of the time tell us that on this voyage, organized by the *UNRRA* (The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), there were about 650 children who were on board by virtue of possessing certificates, unlike those in the pre-State illegal immigration, whose path to Israel was strewn with severe obstacles. In addition to the children, there were more than two hundred public personages, guides and relatives of

officials, 800 people in all. Among these were the wife and young child of Dr. Greenberg of Mother's Pilz-Fabrik brigade.

Twilight fell. The throb of the engines could be felt through the metal floors. Muffled whistles announced our departure. Unhurriedly the *Champollion* raised anchor and turned with aristocratic grace to leave the harbor. Lights were lit in her honor on the surrounding slopes. The tall lighthouse gave her a rhythmic flickering salute. We sailed to the open sea.

The first night was also the stormiest. The next day we saw a quieter sea, calm and awash with sunlight. The ship sliced steadily through the waves, leaving behind us a long wake of water that scarcely succeeded in regaining its calm.

I look back, unbelieving, over the more than twenty years behind me of trying to write. Hundreds of pages. The first page dealt with Belka, the Jewish dog; I pecked it out with one fumbling finger on an old manual typewriter. It seems to me now that I am more at peace with myself, more able to carry the load of memories as they are, aided perhaps by the very act of writing them down. I sometimes feel that as my notes proceed to completion, the memories trapped inside me melt away, dissolving after fulfilling their function.

And what will I do when the writing is finished? An abundance of energy will free itself. Perhaps I shall learn to play the piano; for decades it has sat in our house, like the accordion, and I have not yet touched either. Perhaps I will found a home for homeless children.

I have had two great surprises in my life, besides the fact of rescue and liberation: one, that my memories of those years have not long since grown dim; and two, that my family should bear, against its will and with no choice in the matter, the shadow of my story, which happened so many years ago.

One could look at what happened in terms of energy: a mighty evil invested tremendous energy in a system to produce death, conflagration, and slaughter, and left behind survivors with crippled souls and distress for them and their children, unto the third and even the fourth generation. So great was the destructive energy concentrated here.

I have mentioned two big surprises in my life. I once thought my story was meant for Mother, who never returned to meet me; or perhaps for Father, who

never asked. Later, I supposed it was meant for my children. Now, I understand that I cannot necessarily expect them to read it. I am approaching the end of my journey. Who am I, essentially? I am number 132 in the / convoy / of children to Auschwitz; I am from Children's House No. 4; from Vigniu 44; from Vilnius 18 and from the group of Beitarists on board the *Champollion*; from Tel Aviv and Tel Yosef; from Ein Gedi and Yotvatah; from Rehovot and from Jerusalem.

I am a child of the Jewish people.

A rash of carving names and slogans took over all corners of the ship. Some went even further and added large stars of David or the names of their group's movement. Feuds broke out – members of Shomer Hatzair movement erased the sayings of the Jabotinskyites, and vice versa.

There were also Arabs on board, some of whom had finished their service in the French army and were homeward bound to Alexandria and Beirut. Some were under arrest. They were kept behind bars in a cell, like a cage in a zoo. We started up conversations with them and taught one another a few words in our own language. We were surprised to discover how similar Hebrew is to Arabic. With regard to their fate as prisoners being led to jail they showed a strange indifference, incomprehensible to us.

Many years passed before I started introducing myself with pride as one of those who came to Israel on the *Champollion*. Once I even found a poem that the Hebrew poet Bialik had written on her deck in the twenties. Her end was sad—years later she ran onto a shoal entering the port of Beirut and broke in two; it was claimed that the lights of the nearby airport misled her navigators. I wondered what happened to all of our carvings on the wooden rails of her decks.

We stayed two full days in Alexandria. We were not allowed ashore, but the oriental panorama, full of color and sound, filled our senses. Merchants, peddlers, porters, longshoremen and fishermen boarded and debarked with no small commotion while we looked on in wonder and curiosity. These would be our neighbors in years to come. Quantities of large juicy oranges were passed out to us, bringing home to us our proximity to Eretz Israel. I did not

know then that the color of their skin would one day become the subject of my own scientific research.

We left Alexandria in the evening, knowing that the next day we would reach Haifa. I was swept up in a flurry of packing. I was exhilarated. With the first light of morning I began peering into the distance through the round porthole. Then slowly, through the brightening dawn, the white wisps began shrinking, and off the prow of the ship we could see a thin line of mountains holding the edge of the rising sun.

The mountains grew larger, spreading out to the left and right like wings, and we began to discern in the heart of Mount Carmel the silhouettes of trees, houses, streets, and towers. One street rose straight as a ruler through a golden dome in the center of the mountain, glittering in the light of the rising sun. Near the coastline a large square building stood out: one of the largest hospitals in the country, someone explained to me. The remaining strip of sea grew narrower, becoming a kind of silver river in which the boat slipped silently and slowly to the shore.

Now, in view of Haifa, I burst onto the decks, running their length like a pup gone wild. How, with whom could I share the huge tide of emotion that came over me? Toward me came Yitzchak Ratner, our journey's leader, one of Father's acquaintances, and without hesitation I threw myself into his arms. We embraced and kissed; I needed to share the tremendous wave of emotion with someone.

A similar emotion seized me seventeen years later, once more in the springtime. It was Sabbath morning, and I was hurrying to return to the side of my wife, who the night before had brought our firstborn daughter into the world. As on the wings of an eagle I sped along on a bicycle through the Aravah plain, for the 42 kilometers between Yotvata and the hospital in Eilat, where we were going to decide on her name. I intended to suggest – with many reservations—that she be named after my little sister.

I pushed the pedals with all the strength my 30 years had given me. I wept and sang the entire way. A friendly northern wind pushed from behind as I forged ahead, singing. It was a splendid Sabbath, a festive Saturday, and I was alone in the Aravah, holding it in my arms from the east to the west. The mountains of Edom across from me skipped like rams; gazelles sprang up

behind bushes, antelopes sprang forward to congratulate me. A unicorn galloped in front of me, and after him Puss-in-Boots sprang out of the fable to announce that I was approaching the city. From all the piers colorful pennants were waving, riverboats blew congratulatory whistles. And my boat, sails drunk with joy, cut swiftly through the gladdened river. More than ever before in my life I felt that I had finally passed through the eye of the needle, that I had finally come to the other side of the river. I was no longer alone. How lucky I am, how enormously lucky. And had Mother not promised me all of it? The shore came closer, taking definite form. Land embraced us from both sides. All of us stood on the decks, cheering. The first boat reached us, putting aboard the ship a navigator and two policemen. We stared at them like native tribesmen on a desert island. The rumor spread instantly: the navigator was Jewish!

On the shore people were waiting; they seemed very friendly. Even the row of soldiers along the waterline, all sporting red berets, looked anything but threatening. All day long we made arrangements, filled out forms, passed inspections and held roll calls, until at last they let us disembark by the swaying plank to the shore, where we got on buses immediately. Under the close guard of British soldiers with Jewish drivers, we were taken to our transit camp in Atlit.

The first night in the Land of Israel. Once again, barbed-wire fences, shacks with three-story bunk beds, formations and inspections. Powerful searchlights raked the area.

Five days went by before they began to let us out. The organized groups were the first to leave and be sent to their destinations. Those joining relatives, myself included, were released last and put aboard a special bus.

With wondrous ease we passed through the gate. The driver was a friendly older man, a Jew. I sat alone behind him, carrying on a conversation in my belabored Hebrew. On the way south we passed Binyaminah and Pardes Hannah – he told me their names – and let passengers off there. In Hadera he stopped in the main street, went into a grocer's, and brought me two oranges; they cost five mils.

Our final station was the Sha'ar Ha'aliya in south Tel Aviv. We begin to disperse, and here is Aunt Rachel. Smooth hair, round face, with a close

resemblance to her sister Liba, whom mother and I once visited, leaving at dawn to do so. The goodhearted driver offers to take us to Rachel's neighborhood.

From Aliyah Street, we turn to Allenby Street, then to Rothschild Avenue, lined with handsome buildings; from there to the sparse Chen Avenue, which struggles against the surrounding sand. The avenue is flooded with strong and joyful sunlight; the bus chugs leisurely along, leaving behind white foam. Around us, mothers who speak Hebrew with their children wave handkerchiefs. On all the platforms are people singing "There in the Beautiful Land" in four part harmony. Trees, similar to those I once have met after crossing the river, raise their tall green crowns around us, shouting and cheering.

Ya'akov and Rachel welcome me warmly into their apartment. Their porch, closed off with concrete blocks, will be my room. We eat lunch together in the kitchen and talk a little. Mrs. Pnini and her daughter Hedvah from the opposite apartment, Katzman from the Labor Union and his son Dvir, who live upstairs, all come to greet the new immigrant and marvel at the Hebrew that he speaks. Although I am somewhat distracted, already we speak of my entering school, as a seventh grader, which I should do in the near future, and about a date for my bar mitzvah, also soon to come, because I am already approaching the age of 13 .

I go to bed early. Only two years ago, a mere two years, I had begun my subterranean peregrinations. How many light years that is from me now.

Epilogue

I went to bed early. Much had happened to me this day, and much would happen the next. One of Mother's poems reads ;

*...Un gut azoy iz trachtn izt vun blumen
Vos veln sich zevaksn mit dein trot...*

(How good to think of flowers now
that will bloom with your step.)

In the morning Ya'akov cautiously opens the door, raises the shutter, and says, "Good morning, Sholik, how did you sleep? Care to come with me to the May Day parade?"

A new morning had begun.

